
The Imagined Community, Symbolic Cultural Boundaries, and the Other

*Discursive Activations of Anti-immigrant Sentiment by
Political Parties and the Media in Italy*

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Abstract: Italy, like many other European countries, is at a crossroads with its quickly changing socio-cultural demographic landscape and simultaneously heightening nationalist anti-immigrant sentiment that is lighting up the nation. This paper analyzes the concepts of the imagined national community, symbolic boundaries, and the Other in the context of Italian anti-immigrant hostility and moral panic. By examining the discursive logics mobilized by political and media actors against migrants, I identify the discourses that are employed to negatively construct migrant presence in the community, such as that of criminality, amorality, and cultural incompatibility. I argue that such narratives are rooted in the legacies of Italy's constructions of its own national symbolic boundaries and their identification of the national Self in opposition to the undesirable Other.

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In the past decade, countries across Europe have witnessed the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment within their populations. Many European national communities have been confronted with a clash between their traditional nationalist imaginations and the realities of the changing socio-cultural demographic as many nations transition from being countries of emigration into those of immigration. The changing face of European communities is particularly evident in the case of Italy. As one of the countries most vulnerable to the migrant crisis of 2015, Italy is witnessing the politicization of issues surrounding migration and immigrant presence, which has heightened to the forefront of national public concern. Anti-immigrant sentiments are particularly acute among the local Italian population, with antagonism amplified by the threat that the immigrant Other is perceived to pose to the national community.

Taking into consideration past studies that have revealed anti-immigrant sentiment as characterized by a multifaceted logic encompassing social, political, and economic processes rather than merely immigrant presence, this paper explores the rise of anti-immigrant anxieties by analyzing the discursive notions of imagined community, symbolic boundaries, and the Other in relation to the Italian political community. This paper argues that the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in Italy is propelled by the politicization of immigrant presence enacted by political actors and mass media; and that said actors have further activated public anxiety through nationalistic narratives of the encroaching alien Other who “threatens” the Italian imagined community and its symbolic cultural boundaries. First, I will provide a theoretical overview of the concepts of the imagined community, symbolic cultural boundaries, and the imagined Self/Other. The following section will explore the evolution of Italy’s national political community, with particular attention given to its transition to a country of immigration and its ramifications on anti-immigrant sentiment. After said examination, I will analyze how political actors and the media discursively construct incoming immigrants as an unfamiliar, dangerous Other that threatens the native Italian political community by breaching the imagined cultural boundaries of nationhood.

The Imagined Community, Symbolic Cultural Boundaries, and the Other

The nation rests on imagined and invented attachments between the members of a given community that foster a sense of collective identity. It is configured in a way that denies social differences,

heightening the feeling of belonging to a homogenous national community that is constructed to appear and feel primordial.¹ ² Nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson conceptualizes the nation as “an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”, underlying the inventive processes of creating a national community that is limited to only members of the identified in-group.³ Therefore, the construction of the national community is referred to as ‘imagined’ since it works to naturalize the collective abstract attachments that unify members within a nation.

The “imagined” quality of the nation also denotes the abstract and symbolic dimension of the collective attachments as cultural and moral boundaries that become signifiers of the imagined community. A nation within a set territory is not only defined by physical borders but also by exclusionary symbolic boundaries operating according to the logic of a nation’s assumed cultural distinctiveness and homogeneity.⁴ The national impulse to deny social difference within a nation works to simultaneously define the national community in opposition to the imagined outsider Other, who is often articulated in respect to ethnic, cultural, or racial differences.⁵ Therefore, the imagined community can only be maintained using an inherently and necessarily exclusionary logic towards those that are incompatible with the national imagination. Such exclusionary scripts naturally result in positioning immigrants as the Other, due to their identity being perceived as incompatible with the national identity and its cultural dimensions.⁶ As a result of the symbolic connotations of ‘alien’, ‘dangerous’, and ‘unknown’ are attached to the immigrant, the national Self imagines the nation as the “measure of the good life which ‘they’ [immigrants] are threatening to undermine [...] because ‘they’ are foreigners and culturally ‘different’” and thus infringe upon

¹ Manuela Caiani and Patricia Kröll, “Nationalism and Populism in Radical Right Discourses in Italy and Germany,” *Javnost - the Public* 24, no. 4 (2017): 338.

² Erick Castellanos, “The Symbolic Construction of Community in Italy: Provincialism and Nationalism,” *Ethnology* 49, no. 1 (2010): 66.

³ Benedict Richard O.’Gorman Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6, Fulcrum.

⁴ Verena Stolcke, “Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe,” *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (1995): 3.

⁵ Caiani and Kröll, “Nationalism and Populism in Radical Right Discourses in Italy and Germany,” 338.

⁶ Nazareno Panichella and Maurizio Ambrosini, “Between Fears, Contacts and Family Dynamics: The Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Italy,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 19, no. 2 (2018): 393.

the cultural and moral boundaries that define the imagined community.⁷ Thus, the nation is imagined in accordance to exclusionary scripts that are constructed and embedded in the symbolic contours of a community, such as the distinctiveness of its cultural and moral boundaries.

Italy's Political Community and its Quickly Changing Face

Italy has a tradition of fragmented and weak national cohesion, which has led to a dependence on external forces such as the government, political actors, and media to foster a sense of collective identity and symbolic boundaries by mobilizing imaginaries of cultural and ethnic cohesion. Italy's history as an imagined national political community is one that is fraught with inconsistency as a result of the much stronger pull of regionalism over that of nationalism. The tradition of *campanilismo*, originating from the symbolic idea that attachments to localities extend for as far as their town's landmark *campanile* (bell tower) is still physically visible to the eye, is indicative of the limited and divided Italian identity as a cohesive nation.⁸ The absence of a strong collective national cohesion spurred by cultural and social homogeneity in favour of localized attachments has resulted in the Italian state government becoming the primary unifying signifier for the national experience.⁹ The strong localized attachments and the resultant transposal of national signification to the state enterprise is of particular note in light of the contentious policies of national inclusion. An example of this is Italy's citizenship code of 1992, which limited opportunities for non-EU immigrants to gain Italian citizenship while simultaneously privileging second generation descendents of Italian emigrants with permissions to request Italian citizenship.¹⁰ The state adoption of ethnonationalist policies that are based on the principles of *jus sanguini* (national inclusion determined through "blood"), paired with the localized and limited kinship that defines Italian communities, reveals an exclusionary mentality in which inclusion to the national community is contingent on categories of race, ethnicity, and culture.¹¹ Therefore, although national inclusion is dictated

⁷ Stolcke, "Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe," 3.

⁸ Castellanos, "The Symbolic Construction of Community in Italy: Provincialism and Nationalism," 62.

⁹ Castellanos, "The Symbolic Construction of Community in Italy: Provincialism and Nationalism," 77.

¹⁰ Maurizio Ambrosini, "Immigration in Italy: Between Economic Acceptance and Political Rejection," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 14, no. 1 (2013): 178.

¹¹ Ambrosini, "Immigration in Italy: Between Economic Acceptance and Political Rejection,"

by the state's processes of legal citizenship, said logic is simultaneously intertwined with ethno-cultural nationalist logics.¹² Consequently, the lack of a historically strong national cohesion contributes to a heightened expectation and necessity for the state to validate and determine the collective national identity. The scarce collective national identity in turn has led to the drawing of imaginary symbolic boundaries founded in notions of national ethnic and cultural distinctiveness.

The imagined identity of the Italian community, however, appeared threatened by migrant presence as the country underwent a transformative shift from a country of emigration to one of immigration. Following the country's longstanding history as a country of emigration, Italy quickly became a country that accepted large numbers of foreign immigrant workers who sought to participate in the European labour market. Both public institutions and civil society were slow in the acceptance of such changing demographics, with the state reluctant to implement policies of social rights and protections for immigrants.¹³ Such an attitude is reflective of the resistance against the integration of immigrants into the Italian national community, since reservations against foreign immigrants were fueled by the intent to defend and protect the "sense of community or national good".¹⁴ Indeed, as evidenced in the principle of *jus sanguini* adopted by the Italian state, the Italian political community rejected foreign immigrants on the basis of their perceived threat towards the ethnic and cultural integrity of Italy. Despite the quickly changing demographic of the country, there is resistance to aligning the national imagination with the reality of a multiethnic and multicultural society that includes different cultural expressions and experiences.

The rejection of foreign migrants from the imagined community intensified during the migrant crisis of 2015 when Italy received hundreds of thousands of refugees who crossed the Mediterranean to escape conflict. Due to its geographic positioning and exposure to Mediterranean migrant routes, the Italian government was responsible for responding to the disproportionate migrant influx. Consequently, the government was confronted with a state of unpreparedness not only infrastructurally but

tion," 179. ; Jean Beaman, "Citizenship as Cultural: Towards a Theory of Cultural Citizenship," *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 10 (2016): 849.

¹² Caiani and Kröll, "Nationalism and Populism in Radical Right Discourses in Italy and Germany," 336-338.

¹³ Ambrosini, "Immigration in Italy: Between Economic Acceptance and Political Rejection," 176-177.

¹⁴ Panichella and Ambrosini, "Between Fears, Contacts and Family Dynamics: The Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Italy," 393.

also economically and politically due to various challenges following the Great Recession of 2008.¹⁵ The contentious political and social crises that ensued were characterized by a sense of national emergency and insecurity, with “heightened conflict over cultural and religious diversity” and questions of inclusion.¹⁶

What was previously latent xenophobic sentiments against ethnic minorities amassed into a considerable backlash against the prospect of a multicultural Italy, due to the migrant influx being perceived as threatening to erode the symbolic boundaries of the “dominant culture” within the nation.¹⁷ Consequently, such anxieties embedded in the nationalist panics of breached symbolic boundaries and altered imaginations of the national Self contributed to national public concern “portraying Italy as on the brink of collapse, and its traditions and way of life on the verge of demise”.¹⁸ Therefore, despite the longstanding history of regional, cultural and social fragmentation, the Italian nation quickly found itself embedded in a discourse of the precarious status of the unique Italian identity as a result of the encroaching outsider Other.

The Exclusionary Nationalist Rhetoric of Political Parties

Italian anti-immigrant parties have strategically mobilized the nationalist notion of the threatening Other to foster disproportionate fears and rejections of incoming foreign immigrants. Through the use of emotionally charged language embedded in ideas of nationhood, security, and boundaries, political parties such as the nationalist right-wing Lega Nord (the Northern League) foster exclusionary sentiments directed towards migrants. The party has amplified, heightened, and capitalized on the disproportionate anxieties surrounding the migrant influx that Italy has witnessed by espousing and circulating xenophobic and exclusionary narratives.¹⁹

¹⁵ Pietro Castelli Gattinara, “The ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Contemporary Italian Politics* 9, no. 3 (2017): 319.

¹⁶ Castelli Gattinara, “The ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy.” 319-320.

¹⁷ Panichella and Ambrosini, “Between Fears, Contacts and Family Dynamics: The Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Italy.”; Castelli Gattinara, “The ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy,” 326.

¹⁸ Castelli Gattinara, “The ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy,” 327.

¹⁹ Gabriele Abbondanza and Francesco Bailo, “The Electoral Payoff of Immigration Flows for Anti-Immigration Parties: The Case of Italy’s Lega Nord,” *European Political Science* 17, no. 3 (2018): 381.

The politicization of migrant presence through the rhetoric propagated by anti-immigrant parties is embedded in nationalist notions that discursively construct the Italian people in opposition to the encroaching foreign immigrants. Such language is sourced from the symbolic logics of nationalism that configure ‘the people’ of the nation against the immigrant Others.²⁰ For instance, Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega Nord, dramatically frames the trend of immigration by using the language of national community, security, and cultural and moral boundaries through phrases such as the following: “the continent is losing its values, it is lacking in security, it is losing its identity and has no pride any more”.²¹ In addition to painting the increasing cultural diversity as a dangerous phenomenon brought about by the alien Other, the employment of such narratives triggers the nationalist ideas of conflict, security, and protection of imagined symbolic boundaries that positions migration as a type of “culture war”.²² Indeed, Salvini goes so far as to make the forceful statement: “if you want to live in peace, you have to prepare for war”.²³ The rhetorical scripts employed by anti-immigrant parties strategically mobilize nationalistic language that imagines the Italian nation as aggressively defensive against the encroaching Other that threatens to disrupt and erode the moral, cultural, and social cohesion of the national community. Indeed, the nationalist rhetoric politically mobilizes and discursively constructs “migrant populations and refugees as aliens who infiltrate Europe to corrode its social and cultural fabric”.²⁴ Such imaginaries trigger anxiety and fear in the Italian public because they signal an infraction against their symbolic national boundaries that underlie the collective identity and community.

Anti-immigrant parties such as the Lega Nord strategically problematize and politicize the influx of migrants through the employment of nationalistic scripts, such as cultural homogeneity and protection of the community, in a way that activates anti-immigrant anxieties within the population.²⁵ Through the promulgation of pledges such as “no more

²⁰ Anna Cento Bull, “Addressing Contradictory Needs: The Lega Nord and Italian Immigration Policy,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 5 (2010): 412.

²¹ Sertan Akbaba, “Re-Narrating Europe in the Face of Populism: An Analysis of the Anti-Immigration Discourse of Populist Party Leaders,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (2018): 9.

²² Akbaba, “Re-Narrating Europe in the Face of Populism: An Analysis of the Anti-Immigration Discourse of Populist Party Leaders,” 9.

²³ Akbaba, “Re-Narrating Europe in the Face of Populism: An Analysis of the Anti-Immigration Discourse of Populist Party Leaders,” 11.

²⁴ Castelli Gattinara, “The ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy,” 322.

²⁵ Hajo G. Boomgaarden and Rens Vliegenthart, “Explaining the Rise of Anti-Immigrant Parties: The Role of News Media Content,” *Electoral Studies* 26, no. 2 (2007): 407.

clandestine immigrants on the doorstep”, the Lega Nord’s electoral victories represent their ability to persuade Italians of the necessity to protect the nation through the restrictions of migrant rights, such as preventing the building of Muslim worship spaces, and preserving “certain social rights for Italians alone”.²⁶ Such rhetoric is embedded in the implicit notion that Italians are incompatible with alternative religious and cultural backgrounds, and thus must embody specific qualities in order to be considered as someone that is able to join and benefit from the Italian national community. Therefore, the party both shapes and maintains the Italian imagined community by defining the boundaries of cultural and moral homogeneity of the nation as ones that must exclude the culturally different, and thus the threatening, immigrant Other.

Politicization and Imagination through Media Coverage

The media’s selective portrayal of migration and migrant populations in Italy contributes to politicizing the influx of migrants in a way that activates anti-immigrant nationalist anxieties as well. Studies have found that higher news media coverage about migrants is causally linked to an increased support for anti-immigrant parties due to the news signalling the salience of migration as a public concern.²⁷ Increased coverage in the news generates heightened national awareness of migration issues and thus leads to a process of politicization in the public’s mind.²⁸ Moreover, studies have found that significant news media attention covering immigration issues fostered a public perception of a threat being posed to the nation’s symbolic cultural boundaries, thus fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment.²⁹ Consequently, media coverage alone has the capacity to generate anti-immigrant anxieties through its inherent ability to circulate and signal relevant political concerns, thus problematizing certain concerns and narratives over others.

However, the manner in which mass media addresses and frames issues of migration contributes to reifying the notions of the threatening

²⁶ Ambrosini, “Immigration in Italy: Between Economic Acceptance and Political Rejection,” 181.

²⁷ Boomgaarden and Vliegthart, “Explaining the Rise of Anti-Immigrant Parties: The Role of News Media Content,” 404-407.

²⁸ Boomgaarden and Vliegthart, “Explaining the Rise of Anti-Immigrant Parties: The Role of News Media Content,” 404-407.

²⁹ Boomgaarden and Vliegthart, “Explaining the Rise of Anti-Immigrant Parties: The Role of News Media Content,” 413.

Other.³⁰ In line with the nationalist rhetoric espoused by anti-immigrant parties, the news media in Italy is responsible for depicting incoming migrants as dangerous, criminal, and threatening to the Italian community. Indeed, the Italian media has been found to overreport the instances of crime enacted by foreign migrants in a way that is disproportionate to the violence perpetrated by local Italians. In a similar fashion, current affairs broadcasts have a tendency to feature vocal advocates of anti-immigration policies who practice fearmongering by emphasizing topics such as Islamic extremism.³¹ Newspapers also communicate the strains and anxieties the growing population of incoming immigrants have on local Italians, highlighting their seeming incompatibility within the community.³² By spotlighting the stereotype of the danger and criminality of immigrant aliens, the media perpetuates and reifies a xenophobic and warped reality of the presence of migrants in Italy.³³ Therefore, such content deliberately exploits concepts such as security, cultural and moral boundaries, and the alien Other to problematize migration and construct immigrant presence according to the exclusionary logic of the discourse of nationalism.

The nationalist ideas surrounding immigrants circulated in the media discursively contribute to Italians fearing their nation is under threat as a result of the changing face of the national community. In fact, studies have found that Italians perceive themselves to be living in a very dangerous country due to the increasing presence of immigrants, rather than other sources of concern such as organized crime.³⁴ Such disproportionate concerns about the presence of migrants in Italy are rooted in anxieties surrounding the fundamental sense that immigrants are an Other, outside and foreign to the Italian community, and their presence infringes the imagined symbolic boundaries upholding the nation.

Indeed, the extent to which anti-immigrant sentiments in Italy are discursively activated is evidenced through the fact that once the contacts to migrants are no longer abstract and solely mediated through the nationalistic imaginations perpetrated through the media, anti-

³⁰ Panichella and Ambrosini, "Between Fears, Contacts and Family Dynamics: The Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Italy," 395.

³¹ Panichella and Ambrosini, "Between Fears, Contacts and Family Dynamics: The Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Italy," 396.

³² Castelli Gattinara, "The 'Refugee Crisis' in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy," 324.

³³ Panichella and Ambrosini, "Between Fears, Contacts and Family Dynamics: The Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Italy," 396.

³⁴ Ambrosini, "Immigration in Italy: Between Economic Acceptance and Political Rejection," 180.

immigrant sentiment has been found to decrease.³⁵ The way in which foreign migrants are imagined in the Italian national community as the threatening Other “has paved the way for a collective moral panic, where public anxieties have become widespread and allowed exclusionary actors, as well as mainstream political parties and the mass media, to perform the role of entrepreneurs of fear”.³⁶ Therefore, the way in which the media discursively constructs and imagines the presence of the immigrant in Italy as a dangerous alien Other contributes to anti-immigrant sentiments, since it activates anxieties about the violation and erosion of the cultural boundaries that define the Italian national Self.

Conclusion

Nationalistic narratives are foundational in the phenomenon of the rising vitriolic anti-immigrant sentiments expressed in Italy, especially following the migrant crisis of 2015. The anxieties and fears felt towards incoming foreign immigrants are embedded in nationalist logics of the imagined community, the Other, and national boundaries (physical, cultural, and moral) that are discursively activated through the politicization and problematization enacted by various public actors such as political parties and mass media. The aforementioned actors discursively construct and imagine immigrants as the alien, destabilizing, and dangerous Others, and thus migration as a socio-political phenomenon that threatens to erode and undermine the moral and cultural boundaries foundational to the Italian imagined community. The employment of nationalist discourses that are inherently designed to be exclusionary inevitably leads to a xenophobic rejection of immigrants and the prospects of a culturally and ethnically diverse society in Italy.

The analyses of such discursive nationalist reactions and significations for the alien Other versus the national Self are especially pertinent due to the inevitably increasing ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity that many European countries such as Italy are being confronted with. The contemporary global reality is becoming increasingly marked with intensified, diversified, facilitated, and normalized international and transnational migration. Defined by diversified populations and patterns of migration driven by a variety of causes such as socio-political turbulences, technological developments, and globalized and integrated

³⁵ Panichella and Ambrosini, “Between Fears, Contacts and Family Dynamics: The Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Italy,” 407.

³⁶ Castelli Gattinara, “The ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy,” 327.

economies, the management of national borders has gained an increased relevance.³⁷ This paper illustrates the activation of such symbolic borders in the face of increased perceived infractions of national boundaries and the negative effects that such nationalism can have in creating an antagonistic xenophobic community. Attention to such processes of discursive politicization and mobilization of national sentiments is crucial, as said processes lie at the heart of hostile nationalist resistance developed towards immigrants who are systemically Othered, who will only continue to be an ever-present part of the national reality of Italy and other European countries into the future.

³⁷ Harald Bauder, *Migration Borders Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2016), 4-5, Taylor & Francis Group.

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