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'How can you feel guilty for colonialism? it is a folly': colonial memory in the Italian populist radical right

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to the role of colonial memory in the Italian populist radical right. Italy's colonial past has been long confined on the fringes of memory in Italian politics and in the Italian public debate. While recent academic attention has been devoted to the selective colonial memory transpiring from Italian cultural products, scarce attention has been paid to colonial memory in contemporary Italian political parties' discourse. Therefore, by applying Critical Discourse Analysis to semi-structured interviews with Italian populist radical right representatives from the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), this paper aims at investigating which role colonial memory plays in these parties' discourse. This paper argues that the Lega and FdI reproduce colonial discourse in constructing the image of the contemporary immigrant Other. At the same time, they forge a selective memory of Italy's colonial past, cleansed from its most controversial aspects.

KEYWORDS

Populist radical right; colonial memory; racism; Italy; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

"How can you feel guilty for colonialism? It is a folly", an Italian populist radical right representative claimed in an interview. Colonialism in contemporary Italian public and political debate has been overwhelmingly neglected, although political discourse on immigration is especially dense with colonial tropes. Therefore, to probe deep into the Italian political memory of colonialism is arduous, which significantly contributes to the scarce existing literature on the topic. While ample literature has focused on the Italian populist radical right, including its anti-immigrant racism, and on a post-colonial critique of Italian culture, a post-colonial critique of the Italian populist radical right is still absent.

This paper focuses on the construction of colonial memory in the Italian populist radical right. The choice to analyse this party family is rooted in the increasing success of populist radical right parties in Italy: the Lega shared office with the populist Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) in the Lega-M5S government between 2018 and 2019. Moreover, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), a populist radical right party that has been defined as 'neo-fascist' (Mammone, 2018), made an electoral breakthrough at the regional elections in

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September 2020, when they won 18 per cent of votes in the region of Marche. Thus, it is urgent to acquire a comprehensive understanding of these parties, in particular of their relationship with the Italian colonial past, which resurfaces in the immigration discourse of the Lega and of FdI through the reiteration of colonial discursive categories, such as the Othering, criminalisation, interiorisation, and abjectification of the immigrant.

Through the methodological choice of applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to semi-structured interviews with Italian populist radical right representatives conducted between 2016 and 2018, this article finds that the Italian populist radical right shapes a selective colonial memory that obscures colonial brutalities and creates a positive aura surrounding Italian colonialism. Such a selective memory becomes particularly notable when considered alongside the Lega's and FdI's deployment of colonial discourse in their construction of immigrants.

This paper is structured as follows. It begins by outlining the ideology and the historical trajectory of the parties scrutinised: the Lega and FdI. It will then discuss the advantages afforded by a postcolonial analysis of the Italian populist radical right's discourse. Following interviews with party representatives analysed through CDA, this paper will show that the Lega and FdI adopt colonial discourse when discursively constructing the immigrant as the former colonised Other. At the same time, they select which aspects of the colonial past to remember, thus erasing the most difficult ones.

Populist radical right: definitional and taxonomical debates

Populist radical right parties portray themselves as the spokesperson of the people, voicing the people's anti-elite and anti-immigrant sentiment. The use of the term *populist radical right* in this article captures the position of the Lega and FdI towards the right end of the political spectrum, while avoiding attributing extremist qualities (inherent to the terms *extreme right* and *neofascist right*) to these parties, which officially eschew the use of violence and evident references to fascism. At the same time, the term *populist radical right* expresses the Lega's and FdI's populist ideology. It is important to note that populism is only one among many ideological elements of the populist radical right, and the concept of populism can be applied to a vast array of parties beyond the borders of the right, such as the catch-all M5S in Italy and the left-wing Podemos in Spain (Benveniste et al., 2017, p. 2).

After having clarified the use of the contested label *populist radical right*, this article will now turn to a brief overview of the ideology nurtured by these parties. Among the extensive array of definitions of populist radical right offered in the literature, this article, following Griffini's (2019) insights based on interviews with the Italian populist radical right, adopts a revised version of Mudde's (2007)[1] seminal definition of the populist radical right, whose main characteristics are populism, a strong state, nationalism and racism. The Lega was born in 1991 from the merger of regional leagues, while FdI emerged from the ashes of the defunct Alleanza Nazionale (AN) in 2012. AN was the heir to the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), from whose fascist baggage AN distanced itself at birth, although the dissociation was only pragmatic and superficial (Newell, 2000, p. 479).

First, the Italian populist radical right advocates a strong state against the perceived impending crisis and portrays itself as expressing the will of the pure people, as

opposed to the elites, and to the out-group composed of immigrants (Griffini, 2019). In the Lega's and FdI's discourse, the people overlap to a large extent with the nation, circumscribed along ethno-cultural borders, although sporadic references to civic elements, such as the territory, are present (Griffini, 2019). This definition of the nation largely excludes the immigrants and paves the way to racism, which is the belief maintaining the existence of biological and/or cultural differences between human groups, and manifests itself through the discrimination, stigmatisation, and exclusion of the out-group (Rivera, 2007). Stuart Hall's (1997) seminal notion of racism as discursive, dynamic, and relational, whose meaning is determined by context, informs the conceptualisation of racism adopted in this article, which conceives racism in Italy at the present as the Manichean conception of the immigrant encased within a rigid Self v. Other discursive frame. While there are several groups treated as Other in Italian racism, for example, the Roma (see Sigona, 2016, for instance), this article will focus on racism against immigrants, by critically analysing its relationship with the Italian colonial past, marked by racism against the colonised Other.

The populist radical right's combination of prevailingly ethno-cultural nationalism with racism results into nativism, which deterministically ascribes to individuals the right to belong to the nation according to their ethnicity (Moffitt, 2020). In the Lega's and FdI's discourse, nativism can be gauged clearly through the analysis of immigration discourse, where ethno-cultural nationalism and racism are patent, but also through the in-depth analysis of memory in the Lega and in FdI. Indeed, memory is the mainstay of the national and racial identity constructed by political parties and grounded in a specific interpretation of the collective past (Cento Bull, 2016). Given the mainly ethno-cultural hue of the Lega's and FdI's notion of the nation, interwoven with racism, it is unsurprising that these populist radical right parties create a national and racial identity that is solidly anchored in a sanitised memory of the Italian national past. For instance, Mammone (2018) highlights how the FdI has grounded its reading of Italian national and racial identity in the Ancient Greek and Roman historical roots of Italy, pitted against rampant multiculturalism. Regarding the Lega, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015) identify the party's construction of the nation by excluding outsiders, such as immigrants. Initially, the Lega's nation was limited to the allegedly hard-working and law-abiding Northern Italian inhabitants of Padania (an imagined region in Northern Italy). Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini starting in 2013, the Lega has extended its appeal to the whole Italian nation (Albertazzi & Vampa, 2021). Through nostalgia towards a national past untainted by multiculturalism, national, and racial identity becomes purified from potentially dangerous Others, who are the target of a cultural backlash against immigration, especially Muslim immigrants (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021).

While the Italian populist radical right has publicly steered away from the topic of colonial memory, the Lega and FdI have been less clear about the topic of fascist memory. They have often declared their extraneity to fascism, while at the same time launching a crusade against anti-fascism (Albertazzi & Vampa, 2021; Mammone, 2018). The memory of the Resistance in Italy has, indeed, deeply polarised public opinion (see, for instance, Focardi, 2020), with the populist radical right showing hostility towards the extolment of the Italian anti-fascist Resistance. Recently, the so-called 'black lobby scandal' about some members of the FdI and the Lega found having links with neofascist

beliefs and movements, further shows the populist radical right's ambivalence towards fascist memory (Fanpage, 2021).

The Lega's and FdI's anchoring of national and racial identity in their own interpretation of the past calls for a brief historical excursus into how Italian national and racial identity was constructed under colonialism and fascism. In early twentieth century Italian racism, the Other was symbolised by the Italian southerner. It was under fascism that the Other became embodied by the colonised African (Conelli, 2014, p. 151; Giuliani, 2018). Fascism boosted the Italian colonial venture, through the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 and the consolidation of the colonies occupied during Italy's liberal era, i.e. Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya, occupied in 1885, 1891, and 1911, respectively (Del Boca, 1992, p. 111). Racism always permeated Italian colonialism, but under fascism, racism became constitutive of Italian national and racial identity (Giuliani, 2018). The geopolitical ambition to expand territories across the *Mare Nostrum* to revive the grandeur of the Roman Empire and to provide an outlet for the excess population that the Italian peninsula could not feed was entangled with the mission to develop the fascist 'new man' (De Grand, 2004). Fascist colonialism was intended to create a new national and racial identity and rescue Italy from its inferiority complex of being Europe's internal Other, weaker and exoticised in comparison with the Great Powers of that time (Allen & Russo, 1997; Poidimani, 2014).

Postcolonialism: an analytical framework

The analysis of the construction of the Other against which the Italian Self constituted itself casts light on the essential role played by colonial discourse in the Italian production of national and racial identity. Among the wide range of definitions of postcolonialism (see, for instance, Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012), the latter is here understood as an analytical framework aimed at uncovering the legacy of colonialism in today's political parties' discourse. Postcolonialism attempts to provide a critical analysis of an otherwise neglected topic, since the memory of Italian colonialism has drifted out of public debates in Italy after the abrupt loss of colonies during the Second World War, only to be recovered by a thriving strand of postcolonial literature in the last few decades (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012). Hence, it is of paramount importance to adopt a postcolonial analytical framework to dissect the legacy of colonialism in the Italian populist radical right, especially the part played by colonialism in the contemporary creation of the immigrant Other, and the role played by colonial memory in these parties.

The postcolonial approach to Italian culture has produced a wealth of literature shedding light on the sugar-coated colonial memory shaping the production of the Other in Italy. Fascinating accounts of the lack of decolonisation of Italian films, TV shows, advertisements after the Second World War, and the demise of colonialism have illuminated the often subtle racist messages inoculated by the media and targeting the former colonial and immigrant Other (see, for instance, Giuliani, 2018; Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012; Ponzanesi, 2005). Giuliani (2018) offers brilliant insights also into the reiteration of colonial discourse in the statements of Italian politicians across the political spectrum: for instance, Debora Serracchiani (representative of the centre-left Partito Democratico) and Matteo Salvini (the Lega's leader). Serracchiani deemed the rape of a woman in Trieste as particularly repugnant because it had been perpetrated by an immigrant, who, by committing

the crime, had infringed the hospitality agreement with Italy (Giuliani, 2018, p. 243). In this case, the criminalisation of immigrants recalls the colonial criminalisation of the colonised Other. Salvini's perpetuation of inferiorising colonial discourse is patent when he suggested that the black singer Bello Figo, who is an immigrant in Italy, should work on cotton plantations (Giuliani, 2018, p. 332).

Shifting focus from cultural studies to political studies, a postcolonial analysis of the role of memory in party politics has received attention across the globe. Macron's admission in 2018 of the use of torture in the Algerian War attracted academic attention on the French silence on the Algerian War and on Sarkozy's 2007 address in which he condemned acts of repentance and self-flagellation over the French atrocities in the war against anti-colonial troops in Algeria (Noussis, 2020). In the recent years, a number of authors have been increasingly interested in the hitherto understudied analysis of the connections between contemporary populism and colonial memory in the postcolony (see, for instance, the Special Issue 'Populism in the Postcolony' published in *Kairos* in 2020), and in the West (see, for instance, De Cesari & Kaya, 2020). For example, in the Netherlands, Couperus and Tortola (2019) note that the populist radical right has highlighted the allegedly most positive aspects of the colonial past and fabricated fake historical colonial narratives.

In Italy, Proglio (2019, p. 15) has produced a pioneering investigation of the Mediterranean as a 'ghost' of Italy's colonial past that resurfaces in the contemporary construction of Italian national identity, juxtaposed to the immigrant Other in the discourse of the Lega's leader Salvini. Siddi (2020) has made an innovative move in shedding light on how the Italian foreign policy discourse, during the refugee and migrant crisis in 2014–2018, negated the contentious elements of Italy's colonial past. This selective 'silencing' of the colonial past was embedded in Italy's myth of *Italiani brava gente*, which depicted Italians as incapable of any wrongdoing. Siddi (2020) draws on parliamentary speeches, including the Lega and FdI, but limits the focus to foreign policy discourse. Nevertheless, a thorough and comprehensive postcolonial examination of Italian political discourse in the populist radical right going beyond the Lega's leader and beyond the field of foreign policy is still lacking.

Memory is interpreted here as selective by definition. Memory is the mental capacity of an individual or a group to recall information from the past (Oppenheimer & Hakvoort, 2003, p. 94). These recollections are inherently subjective and biased (Lowenthal, 1985, pp. 194, 206), as individuals select which aspects of the past to remember. Hence, it is impossible for memory to offer a complete, objective, and correct account of the past. Notwithstanding the fact that memory is selective, the Italian populist radical right's memory of colonialism is noteworthy because it chooses to remember what are said to be positive elements, while erasing the negative ones. The latter are doomed to forgetting, which is a lack of memory and, more subtly, the obstruction of a loss (Chambers, 2001) to guard a hurt identity (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, pp. 390–394). When forgetting is a deliberate process to remove uncomfortable reminiscences, it works as a self-defence mechanism aimed at protecting a damaged identity (Mellino, 2012, p. 115). Importantly, such selective forgetting, whether conscious or unconscious, has repercussions for the Italian populist radical right's relationship with immigrants, who are the natural heirs to the colonised Other, regardless of whether their country of birth had been colonised by Italy or by another country.

Methodology

This paper applies Critical Discourse Analysis to semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Italian populist radical right. The interviews, conducted between 2016 and early 2018, allow to gauge the insiders' viewpoint, and capture complexity and nuance (Mason, 2011, p. 64). A possible drawback in interviews is bias: objectivity is hard to achieve (Harrison & Bruter, 2011, p. 65) in most qualitative methods, where data analysis is contingent upon the analyst's interpretation. To mitigate the risk of lack of representativeness, this study selected a sample of party representatives based on their party membership, their geographical area, and level of involvement within the chosen political parties. The party representatives were contacted via email and the response rate was low, which may be explained by the busy schedules of politicians. The sample of representatives that agreed to the interview is composed of 31 representatives: 17 from the Lega and 14 from FdI. The interviewees are located at different levels in the parties' hierarchy: there are town councillors, regional councillors, and members of Parliament. The interviewees represent a wide range of regions: Lombardy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Trentino-Alto Adige (in the north); Tuscany and Lazio (in the centre); and Campania (in the south). Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Trentino-Alto Adige were selected specifically because they are two autonomous regions in the north with regionalist parties. Gender balance was impossible to attain, because only four female party representatives granted an interview.

Interviews have been examined through CDA, which understands discourse as reflecting social relationships, constituted by power dynamics . Hence, discourse ultimately mirrors power dynamics. In particular, CDA focuses on how 'social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (Van Dijk, 2008, p. 352). CDA is especially useful in unmasking discursive tools used by the populist radical right, such as the strategy of denial, through which these parties took their distance from racism, before slipping into racist statements; blame reversal, whereby the populist radical right absolves itself and shifts blame onto a scapegoat; and the topos of threat, which stimulates fear of the immigrant Other (Wodak, 2015). The coding of the interviews through CDA proceeded mainly deductively, based on the available literature on CDA applied to nativism, on postcolonialism, and on populism. However, interviews were also coded inductively, when new categories emerged, such as the abjectification of immigration. The usefulness of CDA also lies in its consideration of the wider historical context in which discourse is inserted. CDA is contingent upon the positionality of the interviewer and the data analyst (Chilton, 2004, p. 205). However, steps to be taken to mitigate bias are to explain in detail the context of discourse and how discourse has been collected, and to be aware of multiple perspectives in interpreting data.

Colonial echoes in the populist radical right

After offering a theoretical and methodological background, this article will now explore the role of colonial memory in the Italian populist radical right. First, although through the strategy of denial (Wodak, 2015) the Lega and FdI distance themselves from racism, their discourse on immigration reproduces colonial discursive categories: Othering,

criminalisation, inferiorisation, and abjectification of migration. These categories have been largely deployed for the analysis of colonial discourse and immigration discourse in the literature (see, for instance, Avanza, 2010; Russo Spena, 2009).

Various studies report the Lega's criminalisation of immigrants, who supposedly deprive Italians of their territory and freedom (Berti, 2021); the Lega's inferiorisation of immigrants, targeting especially Muslim immigrants, due to the belief in the incompatibility between Muslim values and Italian values (Spruce, 2007, p. 123), which assumes that being Italian is inherently incompatible with professing the Muslim religion; and the Lega's accusation of immigrants as agents of COVID-19 contagion (Albertazzi et al., 2021). The FdI's discourse on immigration has been underexplored yet. Mammone usefully illuminates how FdI emphasises patriotism and 'racial purity' (2018). De Giorgi and Tronconi argue that FdI has joined forces with the Lega in fighting illegal immigration and in depicting immigration as an invasion, which is a criminalising image (2018, p. 338). The criminalisation and inferiorisation of immigrants can be subsumed into the macro category of Othering, whereby the immigrant is perceived as an issue, especially irregular ones, prone to criminal activities, frightening, inferior, and, especially in pandemic times, carriers of contagion (Griffini, 2021). Colonial rhetoric permeates the Italian populist radical right's discourse on immigration, even if the racism marking colonial rhetoric is cloaked under a veil of civic rhetoric, whereby the Lega and FdI project themselves as the guarantors of the civic values of personal security, women's rights, human rights, and public health. These civic values are allegedly endangered by immigrants (Griffini, 2021).

The dichotomy between Self and Other is masterfully described by Said in his book Orientalism, where he explains how colonialism was grounded in the irreconcilable ontological and epistemological dichotomy between the coloniser Self and the colonised Other, which was produced by the Self as different, irrational, child-like, immature, and depraved (1978, pp. 3, 39–40). This colonial dichotomy is lingering in the Othering of the immigrant (Faso, 2015; Giuliani, 2018) onto which the Self projects its own denied Otherness, making it into something fearful and dangerous (Gandesha, 2003, p. 4). In the interviews, FdI and the Lega concurred that immigration threatens Italian national identity, undermines social cohesion, drains economic resources, and creates public order problems. As an FdI representative claimed, 'immigrants are odd people, not totally fitting with our rule of law' (Interview with M20180105M, personal communication, 2018).[2] The topos of difference theorised by Wodak (2015) with regards to the populist radical right's discourse clearly comes through the above quotation: immigrants are perceived as essentially different from the Italian Self and as naturally problematic.

Criminalisation echoes the colonial representation of the colonised as inherently suspicious and depraved (Said, 1978, pp. 39–40). Immigrants today are subject to a kind of double criminalisation, because their crimes are considered more serious than the crimes committed by the national in-group, as Giuliani argues while explaining the above-mentioned quotation by Serracchiani (2018, p. 43). The criminalisation of immigrants is rife in the Italian populist radical right, which links them to the crime of invasion, to terrorism and to a wide array of other crimes. In the interviews and manifestos, metaphors evoking natural catastrophes are deployed by the Lega and FdI to depict immigration as an invasion. The criminalisation of immigrants moves a step further when it represents immigration not only as an invasion, but also as 'a mass of silent and quiescent

troops' (Interview with C20170106V, personal communication, 2017) like 'the Barbaric invasions' that spelled the end of the Roman Empire (Interview with F20160905L, personal communication, 2016). The criminalising metaphor of invasion also takes the form of an inverse colonisation, for which immigrants are blamed in the interview. 'You don't have to be Einstein to understand that in the next twenty years the majority in Europe will be Arab, Muslim, and African' (Interview with F20170408T, personal communication, 2017), stated one FdI representative, expressing the Italian populist radical right's concern about the immigrants' fertility leading to their alleged colonisation of Europe. Among the Lega and FdI, there is wide consensus around the belief that immigrants increase criminality, such as prostitution, rape, theft, drug-smuggling, drug-dealing, and pickpocketing. In particular, Muslim immigration is linked with terrorism and with a holy war supposedly waged by Muslim immigrants in Italy. Wodak's (2015) topos of threat is apparent in the discourse of the Lega and FdI: immigrants are seen as naturally dangerous to the Italian Self and such danger is powerfully conveyed by militarised language, such as 'invasion' and 'holy war'.

The inferiorisation of immigration recalls the colonial belief that Africans lacked logic, critical ability, and progress (Cassata, 2008, pp. 231, 234), and were doomed to remain in a child-like state (Matard-Bonucci, 2008, p. 128). Among the Lega and FdI, there is the widespread belief that immigrants are inferior to Italians. As suggested by the interviews, the Italian populist radical right claims that immigrants are 'not willing to work' (Interview with M20170104G, personal communication, 2017; Interview with P20161219B, personal communication, 2016). Within the category of the inferiorisation of immigrants, Islamophobia looms large. The Lega and FdI believe that Muslims have a different notion of respect for women. For instance, an FdI representative claimed that 'the relationship between Islam and women is irreconcilable with Western laws' (Interview with R20180104M, personal communication, 2018). The examples used by the interviewees to support this conviction are the beliefs that Muslim women allegedly 'cannot wear the clothes they like' (Interview with S20180103F, personal communication, 2018) and 'cannot drive or walk alone without their husband in Saudi Arabia' (Interview with G20180109C, personal communication, 2018). The allusion to the belief that Muslim women supposedly cannot choose what to wear is an implicit criticism of the veil that some Muslim women wear. This criticism is grounded in the simplistic view of Islam as monolithically oppressive towards women, given its alleged imposition of the veil supposedly asphyxiating women's freedom.

The category of abjectification evokes the abjectification of the colonised Other driven by the colonisers' fear of being contaminated. For instance, Mussolini banned inter-racial marriages due to the fear of pollution of the Italian race and of contagion of leprosy and cholera (Galeotti, 2000, pp. 96–98), condemned madamism in the 1936 Legge Organica per l'Impero, and denied citizenship to mixed-race offspring in a 1940 law (Giuliani, 2018, p. 78). Abjectification is uncovered by the interviews not only with the Lega but also with FdI. The Lega and FdI claim that immigrants bring illnesses, such as scabies and tuberculosis. Abjectification is patent in the following statement of an FdI representative: 'It is undeniable that in Italy there is an established vaccination and hygiene system. Even the World Health Organisation, which is a neutral institution and not a xenophobic party, reckons that Africa is less healthy than Italy' (Interview with E20170404C,

personal communication, 2017). As a consequence, this FdI representative deemed African immigrants to be intrinsically abject.

Colonial memory in the Italian populist radical right

The reverberation of colonial discourse in the Italian populist radical right's discursive construction of the immigrant Other, prompts questions over the construction of colonial memory in the populist radical right. Siddi (2020, p. 1035) brilliantly suggests that 'the new postcolonial encounter between Italian citizens and the disenfranchised ex-colonial subjects' has been influenced by a 'selective [colonial] memory (…) [that] has fuelled feelings of cultural and racial superiority'. Therefore, this paper does not aim at establishing a causal connection between a selective colonial memory and postcolonial racism, but aims at stressing the ways in which the colonial past materialises through the discursive articulation of immigrants, while dematerisalises in the Lega's and the FdI's memory. Such selective memory is composed of an idealisation of the colonial past and a marginalisation of difficult elements of Italy's colonialism.

As the interviews indicate, the Italian populist radical right's discourse contains sporadic references to a romanticised colonial past. The infrastructure that Italians brought to the colonies is an example of an idealised glorious colonial past often mentioned in the interviews with the Lega and with FdI. Similarly, Italian colonisers are said to have encouraged development and 'left a good impression on the colonised' (Interview with A20180103LC, personal communication, 2018). The good deeds of Italian colonisers go beyond material works, as they also encompass the moral sphere. As one Lega representative argued, 'colonialism brought a more civilised culture, dignity to human beings, protection of the weak and solidarity against abuses' (Interview with L20170404N, personal communication, 2017). Curiously, another Lega representative, using colonial rhetoric, underlined the supposed inferiority of the colonised Other, as he regretted that 'we haven't been able to transmit our own ideals to the races that are clearly not used to these ideals' (Interview with P20161219B, personal communication, 2016). Consequently, the interviews convey the image of an idealised colonialism, devoted to munificently improving the colonised countries without any exploitation. The aura of positivity shrouding colonialism is rooted not only in the conviction about the racial superiority of Italian colonisers, but also in the belief that the colonised countries were *terrae nullius*, 'lacking any significant civilisation' (Interview with R20180104M, personal communication, 2018). As Mols and Jetten (2014) argued with reference to European populist radical right parties, the Italian populist radical right deploys a narrative idealising a golden colonial past, to emphasise in an alarmist tone the discontinuity between a magnificent colonial past characterised by racial superiority and the bestowing of material and moral improvements on the colonies, and a miserable present tainted by immigration and decline. This idealised colonial memory resonates with Couperus and Tortola's (2019) argument on the glorification of an untainted colonial past at work in the discourse of the populist radical right in the Netherlands.

However, this idealisation of the past does not lead to colonial nostalgia, which is, instead, recognised as prevailing in the United Kingdom. In the former colonial metropolis, according to Gilroy's influential argument, the inability to mourn the loss of imperial prestige, worries over the arrival of postcolonial migrants, political and economic crises,

and the perception of a loss of a characteristic cohesive national culture (2005) make the colonial past a source of nostalgia and at the same time, of embarrassment and disquiet. Therefore, the colonial past becomes conveniently forgotten (Gilroy, 2005, p. 81). Nevertheless, Gilroy's argument on postcolonial melancholia and colonial forgetting can be applied to the Italian cultural and political milieu only with some caveats. Italian colonialism represents an exception to the British colonial and postcolonial paradigms that work as a context for Gilroy's argument (2005). Indeed, Italy did not endure a decolonisation process involving anti-colonial struggles, because it lost the colonies at the end of the Second World War, and did not undergo decolonial migration. Moreover, Italian has not been kept as the official language in former colonies, except for Somalia, which retained Italian as an official language until the end of Italy's trusteeship in 1960. Italian colonialism was less long-lasting and less successful than British colonialism, and the Italian postcolonial ties with its former colonies were less strong. These differences in colonial and postcolonial paradigms between Italy and the United Kingdom may explain why colonial nostalgia does not permeate the political discourse on the colonial past in Italy. Instead of nurturing postcolonial melancholia, Italy romanticises certain elements of its colonial ventures: allegedly positive aspects are extolled in memory and more negative aspects are erased from memory. The selective forgetting of their colonial past constitutes a similarity between Italy and the United Kingdom.

In the interviews, the Italian populist radical right largely displays selective colonial forgetting, by either negating or downplaying colonial violence. In fact, fascist colonialism used asphyxiating gas in Ethiopia and napalm to burn villages in Eritrea, and bombed villages in Somalia (Del Boca, 2003, p. 28). In Libya General, Rodolfo Graziani commanded the mass deportation of the population of the Cyrenaic Gebel to concentration camps. Out of 100,000 people deported, 15,000 died in transit of thirst, starvation, mistreatment, and fatigue, and 40,000 died in the camp (Randazzo, 2006, p. 122). Concerning the negation of colonial brutalities, a Lega representative even claimed that 'concentration camps in Libya did not exist' (Interview with P20161219B, personal communication, 2016). This assertion bears witness to the selective 'silencing' of controversial aspects of the colonial past painstakingly observed by Siddi (2020) in parliamentary debates around the migration crisis 2014–2018.

Nonetheless, in the interviews with the Italian populist radical right, it is the belittling of colonial crimes that is more common. Indeed, the Lega and FdI admit that Italians committed colonial wrongdoings, but mitigate their gravity by adopting a relativist perspective, which contends that in the 19th and early 20th centuries 'colonial violence was commonplace' (Interview with F20170104M, personal communication, 2017). The emphasis on immigration is a further pretext to downplay the seriousness of colonial wrongdoings: immigration is considered as 'more serious than colonial crimes' (Interview with A20180103LC, personal communication, 2018). Another common explanation of the Lega and FdI to justify colonial misdeeds is the comparison with allegedly much more violent crimes committed by other European countries, for example, the Boers in South Africa, the French, the British, and the Belgians. Therefore, Italian colonial crimes, perpetrated especially under fascism, become normalised, as they are essentially interpreted by the Italian populist radical right as purely symbolic of the violent practices widespread during the age of colonialism. Italy is no exception in the normalisation of colonial crimes: also countries that do not have a fascist past have engaged in such process. In

France, for instance, in his 2007 trip to Africa Sarkozy recognised that French colonialism in Algeria brought suffering and injustices, but he asserted no meaningful repentance. On the other hand, he claimed that it was time for France to stop apologising for colonialism and mortifying itself (De Cesari, 2012, p. 324). Instead, he encouraged the youth to focus on the future and emphasised the good deeds of French colonialism. In such a way, a state leader, by shifting attention from colonial misdeeds to colonial deeds, strategically enacted the selective forgetting of the negative aspects of the colonial past, precluding the possibility for apologies, and accepting as normal the colonial violence that plagued the former colonies.

The ignorance or the minimisation of colonial crimes in the Italian populist radical right's memory is evident also when, in the interviews, the Italian populist radical right considers it inappropriate to apologise to the former colonies for colonial atrocities. Indeed, in the interviews, some Italian populist radical right representatives utterly refused to recognise the morality and the utility of apologies to former colonies, which are considered 'ridiculous' (Interview with R20180108D, personal communication, 2018), 'stupid' (Interview with E20170404C, personal communication, 2017), 'crazy' (Inter view with F20170104M, personal communication, 2017), 'superfluous' (Interview with G20170411C, personal communication, 2017; Interview with N20180108C, personal communication, 2018), 'useless' (Interview with P20161219B, personal communication, 2016), even 'suicidal' (Interview with M20170111R, personal communication, 2017), and 'pathetic' (Interview with S20180108S, personal communication, 2018). In the words of a Lega representative, 'we already gave them [the Libyans] back the obelisk, this is enough' (Interview with F20160905L, personal communication, 2016). Predictably, the Italian populist radical right bitterly criticises Massimo D'Alema (then Prime Minister) for having apologised in the 1990s (Del Boca, 2005, p. 200) for colonial violence in Libya. For instance, two Lega interviewees concurred that D'Alema's apologies were purely motivated by opportunism (Interview with A20180103LC, personal communication, 2018; Interview with E20180103G, personal communication, 2018), thus detracting from the wholeheartedness of the colonial apologies offered by the then Prime Minister. In fact, in the 1990s, politicians timidly admitted colonial crimes. The then President of the Republic Oscar Luigi Scalfaro recognised Italian crimes, the Minister of Defence Domenico Corcione admitted the use of gas in Ethiopia (Labanca, 2005, p. 38), and Prime Minister D'Alema deprecated the Italian colonial past in Libya and offered his apologies to the former Italian colony (Del Boca, 2005, p. 200).

As evidenced by the interviews, some Italian populist radical right's representatives admitted to Italy having committed colonial crimes. As a Lega representative declared, 'The use of gas in Ethiopia is a historical fact' (Interview with G20170112G, personal communication, 2017). However, even in the case of incontrovertible evidence of colonial crimes, some representatives from the Lega and FdI emphasised that Italy should apologise *only if* it has committed crimes. A Lega interviewee asserted that 'time goes on, but if you have committed serious crimes, then it is never too late to apologise' (Interview with L20180105S, personal communication, 2018). This opinion chimes with the words of an FdI representative: 'If it is true that these tragedies actually occurred, then it is fair that apologies are offered; tragedies are always wrong' (Interview with F20170111F, personal communication, 2017). Clearer examples of what these parties mean by 'serious crimes' are offered by an FdI representative, who stated that 'if you used a concentration camp

or chemical weapons against people (…) it is necessary to apologise' (Interview with F20170408T, personal communication, 2017). The usefulness of these apologies, though, is questioned, as the FdI interviewee expressed sharp scepticism over the value of apologies, due to the time lag between the facts occurred and the time the apologies are provided. Hence, these quotations indicate that the Lega and FdI remained vague on whether they believe Italy actually has to apologise or not, and instead preferred to redirect the focus to impersonal hypothetical statements, shifting agency, and responsibility away from Italy.

Nevertheless, also when apologies are half-heartedly invoked, they have the strategic scope of stopping immigration. In fact, an FdI representative claimed that

> I don't think we have to apologise, but if it becomes fundamental to do so in order to stop migrants' boats from coming to Italy, I will apologise, even if I don't know why, because Italy does not have anything to apologise for. (Interview with G20170109D, personal communication, 2017)

Therefore, the ignorance and the belittling of colonial crimes are grounded in the Italian populist radical right's erasure of brutal aspects of the colonial past from colonial memory. By selectively forgetting colonial violence or distancing Italy from such violence, the Italian populist radical right is declining the responsibility for the colonial crimes committed in its former colonies.

The Italian populist radical right's opinion on selective forgetting is interesting. One FdI contended that '[colonial history] is characterised by positive and negative elements, on which we must reflect in order to avoid repeating mistakes' (Interview with F20170110F, personal communication, 2017). However, in the interviews, the Italian populist radical right generally does not think it is urgent to remember the colonial past. Some interviewees recognised the existence of colonial forgetting, but did not seem eager to overcome it, as this quote from a Lega representative demonstrates: 'Colonies generated a collective guilt, which was subjected to forgetting' (Interview with G20170112G, personal communication, 2017). However, this view did not find widespread resonance: forgetting is said to be irrelevant (Interview with F20170111S, personal communication, 2017). An FdI representative even explicitly advocated the forgetting of the colonial past, showing that, in this case, forgetting was deliberate: 'The past is over (…). In order to carry on, we need to set aside what has happened. Until we learn how to forget, (…) we won't grow' (Interview with L20170410P, personal communication, 2017). A note of caution is needed here, since the intentionality of forgetting is an unresolved matter that still requires academic attention: the Lega and FdI may not deliberately choose to forget the colonial past or purify from its violent elements. What matters for the purposes of this research is that a selective memory of the colonial past appears, either intentionally or unintentionally, in the discourse of the Lega and FdI.

When discussing colonial forgetting, an FdI representative instead raised awareness of the forgetting affecting the facts surrounding the Italian exiles escaping Tito's regime (Interview with G20170109D, personal communication, 2017). In fact, a tendency widespread on the Italian populist radical right is to shift attention from the memory of colonial crimes perpetrated by Italians to the memory of Italians as victims of the left, such as the Italians fleeing Tito's regime from Istria and Dalmatia, who were allegedly mistreated by the Italian left and the trade union CGIL (Interview with G20170109D, personal

communication, 2017; Interview with S20180108S, personal communication, 2018). As a Lega interviewee reported, 'Bologna did not even give warm milk to the children [of the Italian exiles]' (Interview with S20180108S, personal communication, 2018). The emphasis on Italy's mistreatment of the Italians displaced from Istria and Dalmatia appears also in the writings of Galli della Loggia, the journalist and scholar who tried to revive Italian nationalism through a form of neo-patriotism in the 1990s, by highlighting the failures of the Resistance in shaping a cohesive Italian national identity in the post-war period (2003). This amounts to a reversal of blame (Wodak, 2015), to deflect blame away from the Self and instead cast the Self as a victim of wrongdoings.

The search for the causes underpinning the colonial memory shaped by the Italian populist radical right goes beyond the scope of this article and may constitute a fruitful avenue for further research. Indeed, the emphasis on the positive elements of Italian colonialism and the elision of the negative ones needs to be understood against the backdrop of Italy's post-war experience, marred by the lack of a critical assessment of colonialism, due to the demonising equation of colonialism with fascism (Pinkus, 2003), and the myth of *Italiani brava gente*, which established that Italians, a priori, were incapable of doing any harm, as Del Boca's seminal analysis of Italian colonialism argued (1992). Furthermore, the perceived inferiority Italy felt compared to other European countries (Allen & Russo, 1997, p. 3), despite its efforts at crafting a new Italian man under fascism, led Italy to cover up its misdeeds in its quest for prestige. These factors combined to make the emergence of a more nuanced memory of colonialism, shedding light on both its positive and their negative aspects, impossible to attain among political parties. Actually, right after the demise of Italian colonialism, for a brief period the post-war Partito Nazionale Monarchico (PNM) and the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) harboured colonial ambitions underpropped by the image of the Italian colonisers conforming to the stereotype of *Italiani brava gente*. The PNM believed that Italy had the right to reclaim its lost colonies, which was legitimated by Italy's 'civilising mission', and the search of international prestige and a destination for emigration (Ungari, 2014, p. 397). Deploying a similar colonial rhetoric, the DC head of state Alcide De Gasperi desired a return of the former Italian colonies, due to the hard work Italy had performed in the Italian *Oltremare* (Pes, 2014, p. 426). Even the left initially disapproved of the government's colonialist claims, but after 1948, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) and the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) blamed the DC government for ignoring Italian colonial desires (De Michele, 2011, p. 106). Therefore, in the immediate post-war period, a few Italian political parties nurtured colonial claims, underpinned by a positive memory of colonialism. Afterwards, a memory of colonialism divorced from its negative aspects prevailed in the political consciousness through the myth of good-at-heart Italians, and the forgetting of colonialism due to its association with fascism.

Conclusion

The Italian populist radical right has been under the academic spotlight for decades. Nevertheless, an area that has not been illuminated yet enough is the role of colonial memory in these parties, especially considering how the Italian populist radical right constructs colonial memory and reiterates colonial discourse in its articulation of immigration. To fill this research gap, this paper has illustrated the usefulness of adopting

postcolonialism as an analytical framework to examine the role of colonial memory in the discourse of the Italian populist radical right.

This paper provides two main findings. First, this paper suggests that colonial discourse permeates the way in which the contemporary Italian populist radical right, composed of the Lega and FdI, articulates immigration. The discourse on immigration constructed by the Lega and the FdI evokes colonial discursive frames criminalising, inferiorising, and abjectifying the Other. Second, this paper argues that the Lega and FdI selectively shape the memory of the Italian colonial past, mainly expunging it from its most difficult aspects and casting light onto those considered as the most positive ones. Even when the Lega and the FdI acknowledge the existence of colonial brutalities, they deflect attention away from them and instead redirect blame onto other European colonial powers and onto the Italian left, which are accused of seemingly more serious crimes. The fact that the Italian populist radical right parties examined do not fully acknowledge the controversial aspects of Italy's colonial past, which are bracketed off discourse, may contribute to the deployment of colonial discourse by these same parties, evident in their construction of the image of the immigrant as Other, criminal, inferior, and dirty.

Notes

1. This article deems the term *strong state* more appropriate to the Italian populist radical right's ideology, rather than *authoritarianism*, which Mudde (2007) privileges in his 2007 definition of populist radical right's idelogy. Based on the interviews conducted by the author, the Italian populist radical right advocates a strong state, with robust laws and law-enforcement, but it is not anti-democratic. While it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive discussion of this issue, it is clear that populist parties keep free and fair elections, while infringing the protection of individual rights and freedoms inherent to democracy.
2. Quotations from interviews indicate the code corresponding to the pseudo-anonymised interview and the year it was conducted. They are all based on personal communication with the author.

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