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Piemontese, Stefano

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Brothers of Italy? Young Racialized Italians Living the ‘British Dream’¹

Stefano Piemontese

A customer leaves the pizzeria in the cool breeze of the evening and slips between the electrified bodies of other football supporters in search of a comfortable spot in which to relish the celebrations. He needs a breath after seven minutes and fourteen seconds spent in apnoea, between the first kick penalty scored by Berardi and the last one saved by Donnarumma, and the following twenty minutes of cheering, singing and jumping. Italy had just won the European Football Championship against England. The terrace of the pizzeria was heaving with jubilant supporters, but a question had kept buzzing in his head, ever since the first half break when he glimpsed the veins of Milton’s neck popping under his dark skin to the joyful rhythm of the Italian national anthem.

The customer’s flushed body slowly moves towards us and ends up sandwiched between mine and Milton’s. Then, balancing one hand on his shoulder, he uses the other to get Milton’s attention, taps his arm, and reaches towards him. ‘Tell me, why do you support Italy? Were you born in Italy?’ he asks in a hoarse voice while the wrinkles at the edges of his eyes curl into a smile that softens the acrimony of his question. When the corners of this sentence reach Milton, for a millisecond, his facial muscles reveal a distinct ‘what the fuck, even tonight!’ Instead, he answers with a mixture of kindness and compassion, ‘I was born and raised there! In

1. “Brothers of Italy” (*Fratelli d’Italia*) is both the incipit of the Italian national anthem and the name of a national-conservative and right-wing populist Italian political party that won the 2022 Italian political elections. *Fratelli d’Italia* is an anti-immigration party and has hostile positions towards immigrants residing in Italy. In recent years, its representatives have energetically boycotted the approval of a citizenship reform law that would facilitate the naturalization of young people born in Italy of foreign parents.

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Bologna.’ And the name of his city comes out with an accent that leaves no room for doubt.

The customer nods repeatedly, then, while looking around for an appropriate answer, the high-pitched sound of a trumpet comes to his aid: ‘Yes, well, no, I thought you were a sympathizer’, he smiles. ‘Are you kidding?’ laughs Milton, vigorously shaking his fingers in the void. At this, the customer’s hand joins the choreography of ancient gesticulations that shudder across the terrace. ‘Italian!’ he cries while, with a quick gesture, he pulls his hand down, index and thumb united to create a circle as if he wanted to string together, one after the other, all the reasons he had not grasped. ‘That’s right, that’s right’, he concludes, just before being overwhelmed by the voices of Milton and other fans singing at the tops of their lungs *Notti Magiche*, the official song of *Italia ’90* World Cup.

A few steps away from us, Mourad is passionately singing along with a melody composed before he was even born, his voice hoarse from an evening spent castigating and cheering. We had come to the pizzeria in south Birmingham a few hours earlier from Small Heath, one of the city’s poorest neighbourhoods, where for the last year Mourad has been renting a room in the modest male hostel of a local mosque. ‘Only separated men and I live here!’ he joked, as we started to walk to the pizzeria through dark corridors that smelled of aged carpets.

Mourad had arrived in Birmingham almost accidentally during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic after the tech start-up event he had planned to attend in London had been cancelled. He came to visit Ahmet, his father’s old friend who would help him find temporary accommodation and work. Since then, he has lived in the hostel and worked in various menial jobs to save money and brainpower to develop ideas for his tech start-up. Mourad acquired his entrepreneurial disposition from his father, who, in the late 1980s, along with Ahmet and other young pioneers of the Moroccan migration to Italy, opened the first halal butcher’s shop in Turin, then an import–export company, and eventually the first mosque in town. From his mother, widowed when Mourad was little more than a child, he inherited the indulgent spirit with which he confronts the future.

Despite things starting to get going in Birmingham, Mourad often feels like a fish out of water in the majority Pakistani neighbourhood in which he lives. He is one of the very few Arabs attending the local mosque – and definitely the only Italian. And, while this has never been a problem for him,

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over time, he became increasingly aware that the uncommon overlaps of his multiple identities and origins aroused disorientation and suspicion among the people around him, who perceived him as an unidentified migrant object. It must be for this reason that I regularly met Mourad in an Italian–Moroccan café close to where I live, apparently the only place where his hyphenated identities did not have to be explained. Yet, for other White Italians, whether at home or abroad, Mourad remains a foreign body. ‘If I grow a beard, they think I’m a terrorist. If I shave, I’m a drug dealer!’ he told me once. And while we were on the bus heading towards the game, he sarcastically admitted, ‘in Italy, they think I’m a foreigner, and instead, I’m Italian. While here, people think I am British when I am a foreigner!’ Indeed, that evening, before the collective hysteria flooded the pizzeria, I could clearly read in his gestures the defensive detachment with which, every now and again, Mourad exchanged a few words with other Italian supporters. Likewise, I could witness their questioning looks, and I finally realized that being a bit naïve, clumsy and jovial for Mourad was his way of overcoming barriers erected by others. ‘I laugh not to kill myself, but someone does.’

In the days leading up to the final match, the Facebook group ‘Italians in Birmingham and Surroundings’ was in turmoil. The international removal companies’ advertisements and queries about visas and entry requirements generally populating the wall had given way to photographs of the national team, tributes to its players and caustic memes about competing teams. Then, as the final match approached, one question took over the others: where to watch the final? The main concern was finding a location safe from the provocations of the dreaded supporters of the opposing team.

On the frontline of this conversation, one could see a wide assortment of profiles. However, an eye unaccustomed to acknowledging the plurality of contemporary Italian identities – as most Italian eyes tend to be – would have noticed the vital presence of young Italians of migrant heritage, easily recognizable by their unfamiliar surnames, the colour of their skins, or both, Narinder was probably the most annoyingly enthusiastic among them, especially for a football agnostic like me. His cumbersome presence in every football-related conversation also bothered other group members, but for a different reason. When, for the umpteenth time, Narinder interacted under one of the posts addressing the most burning issue of the

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Italian diaspora in England at the time, a short altercation developed, which left me helpless, unsurprised, but also with some hope. A young woman whose imagination of Italianness must have been upset by the presence in the group of people like Milton, Mourad, and Narinder asked, 'but do we have Italians in the group?'. 'Pardon me – answered irritated Narinder – but is it not enough to be born in Terni, to grow up for 27 years in Italy, and have the citizenship and everything else, to be Italian?'. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude, but I rather referred to the background', added the young woman, barely realizing that she had just upheld whiteness as a prerequisite of Italianness. 'Do not worry, Madame', he closes with the false courtesy that haughty people deserve. This brief exchange was still so fresh in my mind that a few days later, during the halftime break in that crowded pizzeria, I pricked up my ears when I heard two boys speak in a strong Terni accent. I approached them with my freshly rolled cigarette to ask for a lighter and, as the south Asian-looking one hands me a lighter, I asked him, 'are you the one who responded to that stupid comment on Facebook?'. 'Oh, yeah, it's full of dickheads, even here. She deserved at least an answer', smiled Narinder.

That evening, on the terrace, everyone seemed proud to be Italian. After the game, some took courage and went to celebrate the victory in the city centre. Others lingered on the road before the pizzeria and eventually went back home. Milton, Mourad, and Narinder also walked away cheerfully, each in his own direction. However, as I watched them leave, I could not help but think about the interactions I had witnessed and how they collided with the jubilant atmosphere of the evening. I asked myself if, besides victory, they were also left with a sense of estrangement and defeat. In subsequent conversations I had with them, they admitted that growing up in Italy as the children of immigrant parents had accustomed them to facing suspicious gazes, inappropriate questions, and racist micro-aggressions on a daily basis. Those behaviours did not alter their cheerful spirit that evening either. Instead, they had sedimented at the bottom of their souls, along with the indelible marks of many other experiences of racialization, othering, and exclusion.

This was perhaps a worse prospect. In fact, the consequences of this constant emotional trickle would not have been immediately obvious, only becoming apparent in the long term, for example, in the decision not to return to Italy. Years before, it was precisely this painful process of layering

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that had contributed to the decisions of Milton, Mourad, Narinder and many other young Italians of migrant heritage to live in the UK. After all, they had moved there for a combination of work, study and lifestyle motives, but, unlike other Italian peers, also to flee a political and public environment that was overtly racist and hostile to immigrants and their children. In Italy, they were not yet considered '*Italian* Italians', as some of them put it, although they aspired to nothing more than to be 'just Italians, and that is it!' Across the Channel, instead, they found a place that seemed more accustomed to ethnic, racial and religious diversity than their home country, a place that, perhaps somewhat naively, one of them had defined as the 'British dream'. For most of them, it remained an unfinished dream, a stage of a transformative journey one had to undertake, hoping that, in the meanwhile, Italy would also change.

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