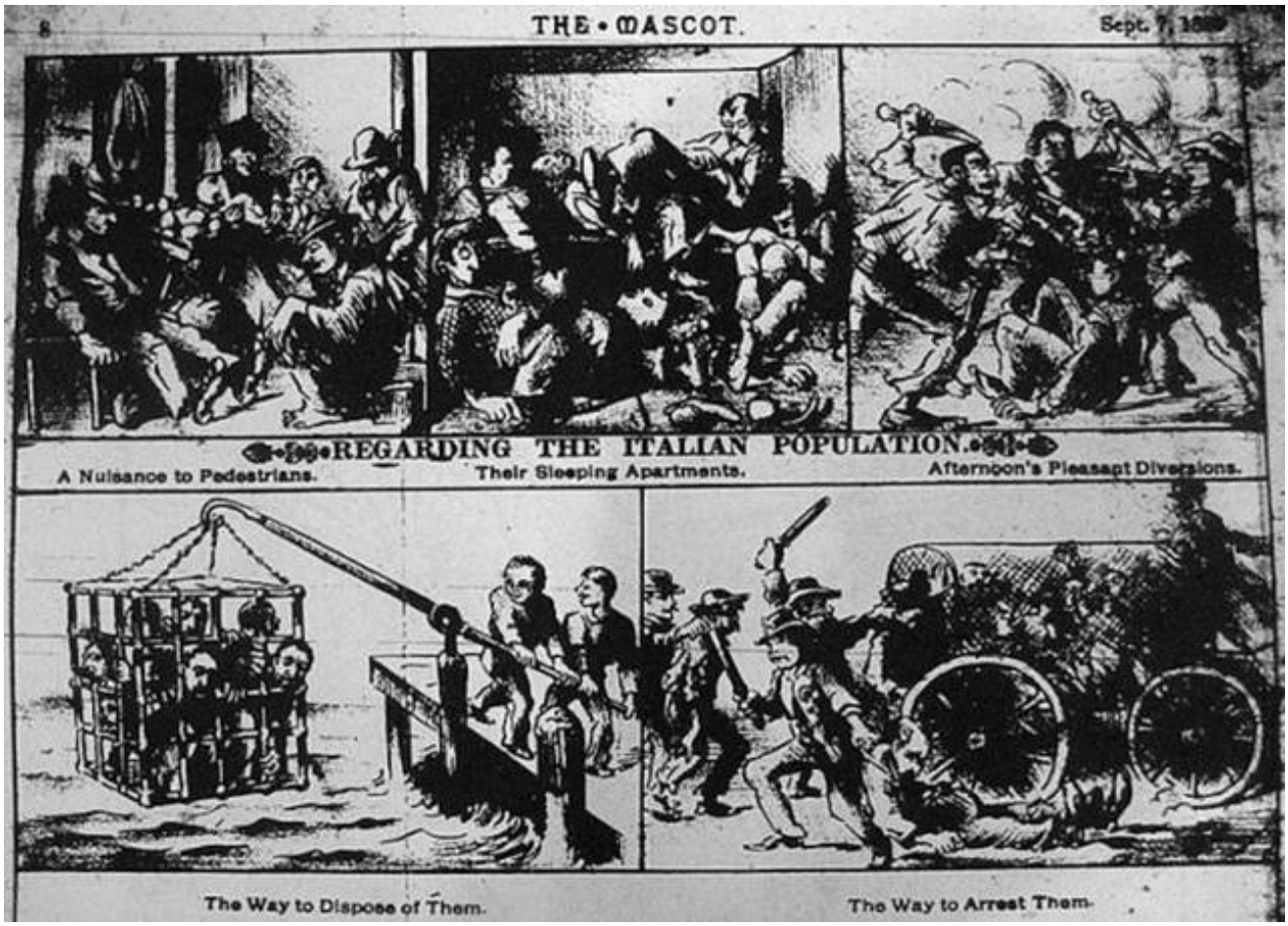
Is Italy Turning Racist?

Judith Harris (May 20, 2015)



Is Italy showing signs of turning racist? The pressure of migration brings new stresses to a country which has had, until now, a proud history of open-mindedness. Because the avalanche of newcomers is not about to be stopped, to seek a peaceful solution to the role of Libya could help, Laura Boldrini suggests.

ROME – Is Italy showing signs of turning racist? Two incidents show what is happening these days, when the pressure of migration brings new stresses to a country which has had until now a proud history of open-mindedness.

It was morning on May 19, and, as usual, the Roman bus on the #61 line was crowded. Seated among the others was a family of five from the Republic of Cameroun in Central Africa, a country tormented these days by raids from the the bloodthirsty Boko Haram [2]. On the bus, as one of the five later related to a reporter for the ADNKronos [3]press agency, “We had just gotten onto the bus, and my young niece took a seat behind una signora [a lady]. Without any reason the woman began to hit the child with a sack she was holding, though luckily without hurting her. When we approached the woman to ask why she was doing this, she started to insult us and said, ‘You Africans, Negroes, what are you doing here?’ Then the old woman took a spray can out of her handbag and threatened to spray us with whatever it was, and started yelling that she had been attacked.”

But others on the bus had witnessed the incident, and protested angrily at the woman’s behavior. Her reaction was to start insulting the passengers who had defended the family from Cameroun. The bus driver at that point asked her to get off, to which she retorted: “I’m not getting off – those Negroes have to get off.” The bus driver then stopped the bus and called the police as well as bus company officials, but before they arrived, the old woman had left the bus and disappeared. Said the man from the Cameroun: “I’ve been here since 1997, and never has anything similar happened.”

On the same day while Romans were defending a black family, in Pisa a group of Italian students, age 14, sent handwritten notes of racist insults to a black fellow student, saying, “No one ever saw a a Negro getting a 10 in law class.” It happens that the girl from Senegal, whose name is given as ‘Aida’ (real names are not provided in cases like these), is Muslim and wears a headscarf to school. She is also a model student who intends to become a lawyer and outclassed, literally, at least some of her classmates; others defended her.

To combat such attitudes, teachers in Aida’s school organized a discussion on racism, and one teacher had all students copy the letter of insults to see whose handwriting might be a match.
Aida had done all her schooling in Pisa, and this was the first time that she had been a victim of racism, she told reporters. In an open letter, she wrote afterward to say that, “It’s not the fault of the school, this is racism by cowards. Today I returned to school as usual, and my classmates were very polite. Still, I consider myself deeply offended… I did not expect this sort of thing. It’s a shame that these people were not taught that what is inside us is more important than what is outside. I still plan to become a lawyer when I grow up, and I won’t let people like that stop me.”

In fairness, one can understand the resentment of the little Alpine communities in the far north of Italy, when foreigners – including someone like me, from Ohio – barge into their tiny, hitherto isolated proud worlds.

While hiking above Santa Cristina, I met a group of young men wearing wreaths of flowers on their hair. One was to be married the next day, and their culture called for an all-boy pre-marital hike. Who can blame them when, in Italian territories like this, where townspeople have lived in the ice and snow for centuries, they desire to protect their ways, their culture, their traditions?
But they cannot, and the avalanche of newcomers is not about to be stopped – nor are racist reactions. This is one of the toughest challenges Italy the government of Premier Matteo Renzi, as well as the rest of Europe, faces today. Never since World War II has there been such an exodus of refugees, and never have the costs of maintaining them been so high. Managing, or attempting to manage, the situation is another huge expense, with some 8,600 Italians paid for their care, and countless others – including in the Catholic church – contributing voluntary efforts.

Even the dead are an expense. Some twenty-five thousand bodies of migrants, drowned as their boats sank, lie in the Mediterranean. Sending a robot deep underwater to film only the latest disaster, the Italian Navy found devastating evidence of over 500 bodies. To bring them to the surface for possible identification and burial is estimated to cost over $15 million.

The funds arriving from international organizations, including the European Union, are plainly insufficient, and their plans include military action approaching the shores of Libya, the primary point of departure for the Italian shores. What is to be done? Laura Boldrini [4], president of the Chamber of Deputies, has a unique history of experience in the field, having worked with refugees in Jordan, Albania, Afghanistan and Italy. From 1998 through 2012 she was the official spokesperson for the United Nations [5] high commission on refugees (UNHCR [6]).

Her sensible suggestion: rather than join in a military action that would reach into Libyan territory, Italy should propose an international conference on Libya in hopes of finding a peaceful solution to the rival governments tormenting that turbulent country and “formation in Libya of a government of national unity.”

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