

## **Lega Nord and Anti-Immigrationism: The Importance of Hegemony Critique for Social Media Analysis and Protest**

CINZIA PADOVANI<sup>1</sup>

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, USA

In this study, I implement Antonio Gramsci's hegemony critique to analyze the anti-immigration rhetoric promoted by the Italian ultraright party Lega Nord [Northern League]. Specifically, this case study focuses on the discourse that developed on the microblogging site Twitter during the Stop Invasione [Stop Invasion] rally, organized by Matteo Salvini's party on October 18, 2014, in Milan. I argue that hegemony critique is helpful to investigate political discourse on social media and to theorize the struggle surrounding contentious topics such as immigration. The method, which is multilayered and includes content analysis and interpretative analysis, allows for the exploration of a considerable data corpus but also an in-depth reading of each tweet. The result is a nuanced understanding of the anti-immigration discourse and of the discourse that developed in favor of immigration and in support of a countermarch, which progressive movements organized in response to Lega's mobilization on the same day in Milan.

*Keywords: Lega Nord, ultraright media, far-right media, anti-immigrationism, Twitter, critical social media analysis, mobilization, Gramsci, hegemony critique*

The rise of ultraright movements in Western Europe and the United States is an indication of the continuous crisis of capitalism and neoliberal ideologies. The financial and economic downturn that plagued Europe and North America beginning in late 2008 and the consequent Brussels-imposed austerity in the European Union have exacerbated the rift between the haves and the have-nots. Unemployment in some European countries has skyrocketed, poverty levels have risen, and the welfare state has been eroded to its bare minimum. In the United States, the lack of basic human rights (access to health care and higher education for all) and the stagnation of middle- and working-class salaries have dramatically stifled the American Dream, as demonstrated by the rhetoric in the 2016 presidential campaign and its results.

---

Cinzia Padovani: [cinzia.padovani@gmail.com](mailto:cinzia.padovani@gmail.com)

Date submitted: 2017-12-09

<sup>1</sup> I thank Soumik Pal, doctoral student at the College of Mass Communication and Media Arts, SIUC, for his assistance with the data collection, and Dr. Rodney Richards for his help with the quantitative analysis and the representation of the data in Figure 1 and Tables 1 and 2. My appreciation goes also to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and challenging comments.

Copyright © 2018 (Cinzia Padovani). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

In such a context, the ultraright,<sup>2</sup> its variants including authoritarian populists (e.g., Lega Nord, or Lega,<sup>3</sup> in Italy; Front National in France; Britain First in the UK), neofascists (Bastion Social in France, Golden Dawn in Greece), neo-Nazi and White supremacist movements (the Alt-Right in the United States), has become increasingly vociferous. The list of ultraright groups is long. However, the pillar at the foundation of all these expressions remains the commitment, as Christian Fuchs (2016) underlines, not to “see social problems as the result of structural power inequalities and contradictions . . . but [to] personalize . . . them and inscribe . . . them biologically or/and culturally into individuals and groups” (p. 188). Indeed, the solutions to social problems proposed by the ultraright never address structural and institutional class inequalities but are based on strategies that divide the electorate and incite fear for “anything that could be constructed as a threat to ‘Us,’ an imagined homogeneous people inside a well-protected territory” (Wodak, 2015, p. x). The result is that extreme nationalist, anti-immigrationist, and racist discourses are becoming normalized in the public sphere.

As one of the main building blocks of the contemporary ultraright, anti-immigrationism is part of a broader hegemonic project: a coalescing force for forging alliances among various factions and groups and for mobilizing consensus. In this article, I study the anti-immigrationist discourse that developed on the microblogging site Twitter during one of the largest anti-immigration marches in Italy in recent years, the Stop Invasione rally in Milan, on October 18, 2014.

Lega Nord, an ultraright populist party founded in 1991 by Umberto Bossi, was the main promoter of the march. The party could count on a capillary presence in northern Italy and its own well-established media network to support the initiative. CasaPound Italia, a self-defined fascist social movement, and activists from Front National and Generation Identitaire also attended.

The march was the first public demonstration organized under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who had become Lega’s secretary-general in December 2013 with the mission to broaden the party’s appeal beyond the confines of northern Italy. His goal was for Lega to become a true national force and ally with other ultraright groups in a common fight against “the enemies of all Italians”: illegal immigration, the European Union, and the economic crisis (Cremonesi, 2014). By using the French Front National as his model, the young leader sought to achieve a hegemonic position within the Italian right. In particular, immigration, according to Salvini, was the first and common enemy to fight given the direct connection he saw between immigration and rising unemployment (Mingoia, 2014). His plans eventually proved successful: Indeed, only four years later, Lega had become a major force. From a party in disarray (in the early 2010s), marred by charges of corruption and nepotism, it had achieved unprecedented success, going from 8% of the national vote in the 2013 political elections to 18% in the 2018 elections.

---

<sup>2</sup> No single term can account for the myriad far-right populist, neofascist, and White supremacist groups that have emerged in Europe and the United States since the 1990s. As Downing (2001) suggests, the use of the term “ultraright” might help us steer away from frequent linguistic balancing of “extreme” and “far” left with “extreme” and “far” right typical of mainstream media commentators and policy makers.

<sup>3</sup> In January 2018, the party officially changed its name into “Lega.” In this article, I will use “Lega Nord” and “Lega” interchangeably.

On the same day of the march, progressive and antiracist movements planned a countermobilization. On social media, militants promoted their initiative with the hashtag #Stopinvasione della Lega (Stop the invasion of the Lega) and its variants (#Stopinvasione di leghisti—Stop the invasion of Lega militants). In this article, I also analyze the discourse that emerged from the antiracist march, which attempted to deconstruct Lega's main argument with one in favor of immigration and integration.

### Literature Review

The literature on the ultraright is vast and multidisciplinary. Since the early 1990s, political scientists have been studying the formation of contemporary ultraright parties (Ignazi, 1992), their relationship with historical fascism (Eatwell, 2004), the ideologies that characterize the ultraright "party family" (Mudde, 2000), and ultraright media use and strategies (Atton, 2006; Fuchs, 2016; Padovani, 2008, 2016).

Of particular interest for this study is scholarship in the field of critical discourse studies, which has demonstrated that nationalism, xenophobia, and racism are some of the most recurrent themes of the ultraright. The degree to which such characteristics have been displayed in public has changed in accordance with broader historical and political trends. For instance, scholars have found that during the decades immediately after World War II, ultraright leaders and party propaganda adopted a *double-speak* strategy, defined as "a rhetorical form of deception and political cunning intended to attack an enemy from within . . . by aping the language of liberal democracy" (Jackson & Feldman, 2014, p. 11). Such strategy consisted in covering up racist language in public while preaching the "truth to the hardcore" (Jackson & Feldman, 2014, p. 11) in private communications and face-to-face meetings.

Since the late 2000s, the use of openly racist language has been normalized and instrumental to the goal of implementing a "politics of fear" (Wodak, 2015). Ruth Wodak (2015) has identified various strategies in this regard, including the "rhetoric of exclusion," whereby ultraright politicians frame their speech upon the notion of a cohesive national community as a "homogenized ideal based on nativist ideologies" and then claim to represent "We, the people" against all "Others" (p. 21). Although the "Other" is often a floating signifier, the strategies of representing the out-group typically tend to foreground what is positive about "us" and negative about "them," and vice-versa, to background what is negative about "us" and positive about "them" (van Dijk, 1998).

Scholars have also revealed that ultraright politicians have implemented a well-established pattern of metaphors to heighten the perception of danger about immigration and to influence public discourse and legislation. For instance, in her study of parliamentary discourse on immigration in France, Ineke van der Valk (2003) identifies aggression and war metaphors, water-related metaphors, and organic metaphors as the defining characteristics of immigration discourse since the 1980s. In her analysis, all these metaphors suggest that immigration has been represented as an "inevitable . . . natural disaster" (p. 333). Van der Valk (2003) also underlines the "transnational character" of these metaphors, which "transgress . . . territorial and linguistic boundaries"(p. 331). Indeed, Gerald O'Brien (2003), in a study of congressional speeches in the United States in the early 1900s, confirms the international resonance and the historical resilience of anti-immigration rhetoric. O'Brien has found that organism metaphors were particularly apt at

conveying the sense of an impending disaster brought about by the “newcomers” and establishing the connection “between disease and immigration” (p. 36).

In the Italian context, Lega Nord has been defined as the first “political entrepreneur” of xenophobia for its role in focusing the political debate on the dangers of immigration and profiting from it (Avanza, 2010). During political campaigns, especially in the early 2000s, images of “hordes” amassed on boats were used in party propaganda to heighten the fear of an impending invasion (Richardson & Colombo, 2013). Similar metaphors were also used in official documents (Fella & Ruzza, 2006). Since the late 1990s, the threat of an invasion was also associated with that of an Islamic takeover. Silhouettes of women, their faces fully covered by burkas, often appeared on official pamphlets to warn of an impending “Islamic invasion” (Avanza, 2010).

This present study builds upon the existing scholarship by investigating Lega Nord’s anti-immigrationist discourse at the onset of a new phase of the party’s history and on the occasion of the first public demonstration under Salvini’s leadership. The study also proposes a novel theoretical approach, as I argue that a hegemony critique is necessary to theorize the discourse promoted by Lega and discuss the challenges launched against that discourse by proimmigration, antiracist activists.

### **Hegemony Critique**

The visibility of ultraright ideologies is a reminder that cultural leadership is a necessary component of any form of domination in contemporary societies; indeed, it is something that ultraright organizations themselves strive to achieve. Therefore, a critique that puts at the center the notion of hegemony might be useful to study the role that anti-immigrationism plays in the overall goal of achieving visibility and mobilizing support around repressive ideologies. At the same time, such a critique can help us better contextualize the work of progressive groups and movements as they challenge one of the foundational blocs of contemporary ultraright discourse.

To develop the theoretical framework for this article, I rely on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. According to the antifascist activist, although economic structures determine in various ways the consciousness of human beings, effective cultural leadership is achieved once structural and superstructural forces lock in to form a “historic bloc” whereby specific ideological constructs, functional to the interests of the dominant classes, become plausible and universal, accepted more or less tacitly by most.

The analysis of hegemony, for Gramsci, “was inextricably bound to his political project, which would replace revolutionary action and direct military attack . . . with an oppositional and alternative hegemony” (Mosco, 2009, p. 207). However, this element—the connection to a political project of emancipation—and the historicity of the critique have been somewhat lost in contemporary analyses of the relationships between structure and superstructures and the re-evaluations of ideology as false consciousness. In fact, I argue that Gramsci’s contributions cannot simply be considered an “ideology theory,” as Fuchs (2016) proposes, and therefore demoted to a generic theory of a “superstructure of a particular structure . . . a ‘conception of the world’” (p. 173). Gramsci’s critique of hegemony was inspired by a precise vision of emancipation toward a society led by the subaltern classes; as such, it was philosophy in action.

Indeed, as recent scholarship points out, it is necessary to contextualize Gramsci's work "in the currents of his time" (Thomas, 2010, p. xviii) and to "specify the political horizon within which [his] philosophical arguments were composed" (p. 38). Gramsci himself warns us of how difficult it is to identify and "fix the relationships between structure and superstructures . . . and between those elements that can be considered permanent and those 'occasional' of the structure" (Gramsci, 2014, Notebook 4, para. 38).<sup>4</sup> A task such as this can only be achieved on the basis of concrete long-term historical studies. Moreover, he makes no distinction between critique and theory, but only between political critique and historical-social critique: the former is the critique of that which is "occasional"; the latter of what is "permanent" (Gramsci, 2014, Notebook 4, paras. 35 & 38).

Gramsci's conclusion that "everything is political . . . and that the only philosophy is history in action" brings us to one key contribution: that the "philosophy of praxis is the expansive philosophical form . . . of a genuine proletarian hegemony" (Thomas, 2010, p. xxv). Hegemony, in this regard, cannot be intended as theory but as a "philosophy of praxis," a process of permanent revolution, necessary for the

development of autonomous forms of political practice . . . a necessary moment in a social class's emergence from subalternity, so the transformation of philosophy and the elaboration of an independent conception of the world figures as an ineludible moment in the forging of a class's coherence and capacity to act. (p. xxv)

As such, hegemony critique can be useful for the analysis of discursive formations in social media in that it helps us identify the characteristics of dominant forms of discourse while it legitimizes our attention to forms of oppositional discourse, which might otherwise go undetected or be undermined.

For a new social class to develop and lead, Gramsci thought it would be necessary to abandon any notion of ideology and hegemony as fixed systems of ideas and to become aware instead of their historical and transient nature, along with the complex set of alliances needed to support them, and then work toward replacing the hegemony of the capitalist class with the cultural leadership of the working class, that is, the "proletarian hegemony." To highlight this historic and process-bound interpretation of hegemony as necessary for the emancipation of the oppressed serves at least three main purposes: (a) to look beyond the day-to-day occurrences when searching for inconsistencies and contradictions in contemporary dominant ideological formations, (b) to realize that emancipation is not only economic emancipation but also emancipation of the mind and of self-consciousness, and (c) to give attention not only to the usual large trends and data sets (in the case of this article, the dominant discourse surrounding #Stopinvasion) but also to instances (however small) of oppositional discourse (i.e., the discourse surrounding the proimmigration, antiracist march in this particular study).

Hegemony represents the essence of class domination. As a system of cultural leadership, it is an integral part of the structures of oppression and would be unattainable without access to communication, education, the political and legal systems, and a complacent state apparatus. As a philosophy of praxis, hegemony is not a relativist position, as access to cultural production and expression is not equally available

---

<sup>4</sup> All quotes from Gramsci's *Quaderni del Carcere* [Prison Notebooks] are my translation.

and afforded to all classes. Economic conditions define the emergence of social classes, but the ways in which the relationships of forces develop largely depend on the ability and power to transform the interests of one class into the dominant ideology in a society.

In this context, hegemony critique is the counterpoint to relativism. Indeed, the process toward achieving a better and more just society includes cultural leadership for the working class, which in turn depends upon the working class, or, in a broader context, the oppressed, gaining full autonomy in the form of self-consciousness, a process of personal and collective reflection informed by historical materialist analysis, and the organic rise of intellectuals and activists. None of this would be possible without addressing the economic inequalities that constitute the conditions of one's existence under capitalism.

Likewise, the process of disrupting the hegemony of the existing social order is neither a stand-alone process nor a progression that by itself, without an intervention in the economic and the public policy spheres, would automatically and autonomously produce change. Indeed, in the discussion of the concept of "permanent revolution," Gramsci (2014) specifies: "Hegemony is political, but is also and especially economic, it has its material base in the decisive function that the hegemonic bloc exercises on the decisive nucleus of the economic activity" (Notebook 4, para. 38).

Long crises indicate that "in the structure insoluble contradictions have been occurring, and that the political forces, operating positively for conserving the structure itself are working hard to address, within certain limits, these incessant efforts represent the terrain of the occasional" (Gramsci, 2014, Notebook 4, para. 38). Distinguishing the permanent (the crisis of the structure) from the occasional (the efforts of political forces to contain and address—although superficially—those crises) is key for an effective philosophy of praxis. That is a time for the productive forces of history to rise and impose their worldview, which reflects the reality of oppression and disrupts oppression in all its forms. The philosophy of praxis, that is, the hegemony of the proletariat, is a superior form of philosophy and hegemony. As such, there is not a shred of relativism in Gramsci's analysis.

### ***Anti-immigrationism and Lega***

Anti-immigrationism, the topic of this case study, is an ideological formation that feeds upon racist and xenophobic impulses. It is a system that creates scapegoats without addressing the structural problems at the root of the crisis in the labor market, the loss of manufacturing jobs in the Global North, the impoverishment of the working class, and the shrinking of the middle class. In Gramsci's (2014) words, anti-immigrationism would represent one of the "continuous efforts" on the part of "the political forces operating positively to conserve the existing structure" (Notebook 6, para. 7) to "heal" (*sanare*) the crises of global capitalism.

Anti-immigrationism has been functional to the broader hegemonic design to avoid facing the reality of a failing capitalist system based, as was the case in the traditionally wealthy north and northeast regions of Italy, on family-owned firms and exports of made-in-Italy products and to hide the structural causes (the rising global competition in the textile and other manufacturing industries) for decreasing employment while directing rage toward the outsiders and the establishment. Since the 1990s, for the

French National Front, the German Republikaner Party, and the Lega Nord, the slogan has been "eliminate unemployment, stop immigration" (Ebata, 1997, p. 14).

Initially, Lega Nord had professed a version of ethnonationalism based upon the myth of homogeneous communities sharing the same territory, ethnicity, languages, religions, and cultural traditions. A fierce opposition to the national government also characterized its early ideology (Biorcio, 1997). In the 1980s and 1990s, immigration from Italy's south to the north was framed as part of Rome's plan to colonize the "Padania" (the Lega's mythical homeland). By the end of the 1990s, the Lega had added to the list of its targets the "extracommunitarians" (Albanians and Romanians, in particular), followed by Moroccans and Muslims. In the discourse analyzed for this study, I found various sarcastic remarks against "Congolese" people, and Africans in general.

### **Method**

A hegemony critique starts with the assumption that cultural leadership is a vital instrument of class domination that must be replaced with the hegemony of the oppressed. Therefore, this article offers an analysis of how LN leaders and militants contributed to the consolidation of a hegemonic interpretation of immigration, while also accounting for the proimmigrant and antiracist discourse that emerged through the counterdemonstration. The main questions leading my analysis are the following: How was anti-immigrationism constructed on Twitter in preparation for and during the march? How did the counter proimmigration and antiracist discourse develop, and what strategies characterized it? To address these questions, I followed a multimethod approach: First, I created the sample by performing a search based on a selection of hashtags. I then conducted a close reading of the sample, analyzing of the written text and examining the visuals. I drew from critical discourse studies (Wodak & Busch, 2004) to bring to light the ideological assumptions in the tweets.

### ***Defining the Contours of the Discourse***

The process of defining the sample included several steps. First, to capture relevant tweets, I selected seven hashtags based on observation of social media usage in the weeks leading up to the march. In an effort to capture the anti-immigration and the pro-immigration discourse, I ran a search from October 1 to October 31, 2014, using the following terms: #stopinvasion OR #stopimmigration OR #noracism OR #stopinvasione OR #bastaclandestini OR #nomarenostrom OR #norazzismo. The search was performed using the social media monitoring tool Sysomos and yielded 70,637 tweets.

Because one of the goals of this study is to perform an in-depth reading in addition to identifying tweets that countered the hegemonic discourse of anti-immigrationism, it was necessary to create a more manageable data set. To do so, I created a random sample of 5,000 tweets (7.1% of the original data). These tweets were then extracted and placed on an Excel spreadsheet along with, among other things, the date and time, the content, and the author's name.

To ensure that the seven hashtags were indeed capturing the march-related discourse, I categorized the sample according to hashtags. After having separated tweets containing each of the seven

hashtags, all of the data were sorted based on time to allow me to see the temporal relationship of tweets containing each hashtag to the day of the march (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Number and Percentage of Tweets Over Time.**

Hashtag (Total)	Day of October 2014																															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	
#stopinvasione (4,326)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	2	77	6	2	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#noracism (453)	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	4	1	0	19	3	4	8	5	1	28	10	1	2	
#bastaclandestini (57)	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	9	14	11	0	2	0	0	0	4	4	54	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
#stopimmigration (17)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	24	0	0	0	0	0	6	6	18	0	6	6	0	0	0	12	6	6	
#norazzismo (17)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	71	12	6	0	0	6	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
#stopinvasion (9)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	78	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
#nomarenostrom (6)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	0	0	33	0	0	0	17	0	0	17	0	0	0	0	0	

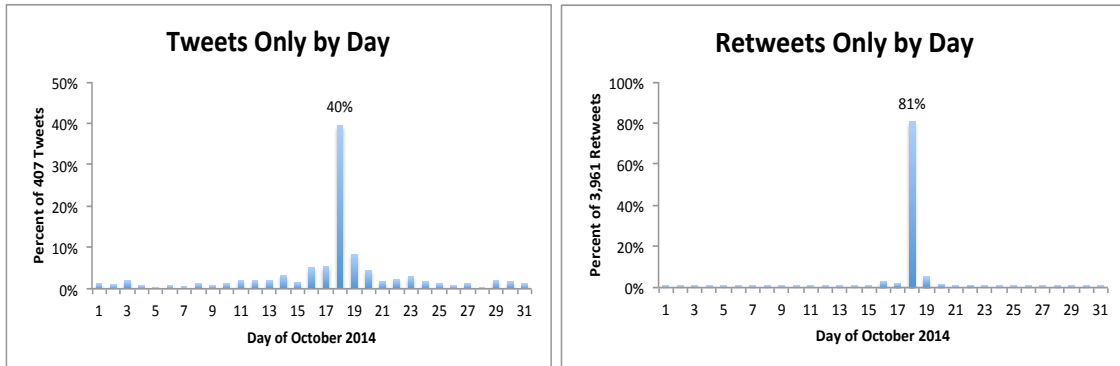
Note. Percentages are highlighted on a grey scale from light to dark for low to high.

The hashtag #Stopinvasione was the most frequently used. The majority (77%) of the 4,326 tweets containing this hashtag occurred on the day of the march, with the rest clustered in close proximity. The results for #bastaclandestini and #norazzismo revealed similar results. I eliminated the other four hashtags because they had no temporal relationship to the event.

I further refined the sample by separating original tweets from retweets. This was achieved by alphabetically sorting based on the content column, which grouped all retweets as a result of "RT @Authors handle." These were cut and pasted into a separate sheet in the Excel workbook. The vast majority of the sample, more than 90% (3,961), was retweets, compared with 416 original tweets.

The temporal occurrence of the tweets and retweets is noticeably different, with more than 80% of retweets occurring on the day of the march, compared with 40% of the original tweets (Figure 1). This suggests that original tweets may have been used more for organization, logistics, recruiting, and sharing of information before and after the march, whereas retweets might have been more functional in creating a sense of community during the march and focusing on disseminating real-time coverage.





**Figure1. Tweets and retweets by day.**

I then analyzed the retweets according to their original authors. As seen in Table 2, Salvini’s tweets were the most retweeted (3,006 of the total, or 76%); no other author came close to this number. Research has shown that the use of hashtags and retweets is meant to “signal solidarity [and] reclaim a sense of belonging and commonality” (Milan, 2015, p. 54).

**Table 2. Original Authors Retweeted More Than 10 Times.**

Author	Frequency	Followers	Account Name
RT @ matteosalvinimi	3,006	369,000	Matteo Salvini
RT @ StopInvasione	89	405	Stop Invasione
RT @ Piovegovernolad	80	97,500	Piovegovernoladro
RT @ [REDACTED]	26	10,500	[REDACTED]
RT @ [REDACTED]	21	1,596	[REDACTED]
RT @ Cantiere	20	4,438	Cs Cantiere
RT @ LegaNordPadania	20	22,000	Lega Nord Padania
RT @ [REDACTED]	16	40,200	[REDACTED]
RT @ [REDACTED]	14	16,100	[REDACTED]
RT @ syndicalisms	13	19,700	syndicalst
RT @ Wu_Ming_Foundt	13	68,300	Wu Ming Foundation
RT @ DragoEnzo	13	n/a	n/a
RT @ gasparripdl	13	93,300	Maurizio Gasparri
RT @ TW_laPadania	12	5,071	laPadania
RT @ Lecchinimichele	12	15,200	#scuotelecoscienze
RT @ welikechopin	11	225,000	Gazebo
RT @ [REDACTED]	11	2,751	[REDACTED]

Note. Only the accounts of public figures and collectives are made visible. For privacy concerns, all others are hidden.

Indeed, such a high percentage of retweets with the hashtag #Stopinvasione on the day of the march might be interpreted as activists' efforts to amplify Salvini's messages and to foster identity and community.

To arrive at a manageable sample, I eliminated all but the first occurrence of redundant retweets, which brought that number down to 696. The final sample included these retweets along with the 416 original tweets, for a total of 1,112 tweets.

### ***In-Depth Reading***

I read in chronological order all tweets and retweets and also inspected visual elements (attached to approximately 50% of the sample). I took notes, highlighting and recording in particular the choice of lexicon and particulars of the images. At times, I followed some of the comments and replies to the most retweeted tweets. I elaborated categories for interpretation and then coded the tweets and retweets on the basis of the discursive themes that emerged. Toward the end, I went back to the data set to validate my analysis one more time.

### **The Discourse of #Stopinvasione**

As Wodak (2013) explains, the "us" of ultraright ideologues is an imaginary community based upon "nativist ideologies," a "revisionist view of history," and exclusionary strategies, justifying why "we" need to "defend ourselves against 'Them'" (p. 29). The Stop Invasione march was mobilized around this very concept of unity in the face of an invasion. Therefore, I start the analysis by sorting out some of the referential and predicational strategies implemented to represent the two main categories of anti-immigrationist discourse: "us" versus "them." Reisigl and Wodak (2001) list "tropes, biological naturalizing and depersonalizing metaphors" (p. 45) as strategies to refer to "immigrants," whereas choices of stereotypes, attributes, verbs, and sentence structures represent the speaker's overall predicational strategy aimed at positively characterizing "us" while negatively representing "them." On Twitter, the choice of visuals, including memes and photographs, provide an even wider panoply of interpretative possibilities, complementing what is already being communicated in the written text. Each of these elements "allows [the speaker] to highlight some kind of meaning and to background others" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 30), thereby following the pattern of foregrounding positive information about the in-group and negative information about the out-group.

In the next section, I analyze some of the referential and predicational strategies implemented to characterize "us" in the discourse that emerged around the #Stopinvasione hashtag, focusing attention on the lexicon and on visuals.

### ***Lexicon***

"Gente" [people] was one of the most recurrent nouns used to refer to the in-group. Qualifiers often associated with this term were "comune" [common, as in "the common people"], "perbene" [proper], "onesta" [honest], "generosa" [generous], "bella" [beautiful], or simply, "splendida" [splendid]. Some examples: In one of the many retweets from Salvini's account, the Lega Nord leader expressed awe at the large crowd of militants

in Milan and defined the main square where the militants had gathered as “the square of the proper people, honest and generous”; in another, he defined the march as a “a multitude of beautiful people who have spoken with one voice.” The Lega leader kept referring in positive terms to the militants. One of the last retweets coming from his account read: “I wish that a COMMUNITY of different people from the rest of Italy were born here today, splendid people!” Salvini was well aware that new alliances were being mobilized. It is significant that he mentions a “different people from the rest of Italy,” thus calling attention to the need for change and for Lega to be part of that change.

As part of the topos frequently used in anti-immigration discourse that depicts immigration as a burden, Italians would be able to welcome immigrants only when those going through “true hardships” would “have a state able to defend their rights,” echoing, once again, typical Lega Nord (and other ultraright populists’) assumptions according to which the centralized state and the current government are the enemies of the common people. As some of Salvini’s tweets read: “If resources are scarce, I prefer to help the unemployed and Italian retirees first” and “Italians deserve a country that sustains their priorities and only later thinks about others.”

Once the in-group had been constructed and represented, positive predications followed. Salvini’s tweets defined the discourse according to predicational strategies aimed at further defining the people through their moral character and their good looks. Adjectives such as “proud and peaceful,” “smiling,” and “beautiful” resonated. These were part of the ideological construction of “us” as caring and well-intentioned individuals, as in the example in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. One of Salvini’s tweets announcing the march.**

The tweet shown in Figure 2 reads: “Saturday in #Milan many mums and dads, proud and peaceful, defend the future of their babies and say loud and clear #Stopinvasione!” During the march, the representation of militants as smiling, loving people and concerned parents continued, as in another tweet, in which Salvini marveled at the gathering of militants, declaring, “This is the square of this 4-month-old baby . . . No fear of showing the smile of our babies!”

### Visuals

The mobilization was characterized by a campaign structured around the hashtag #iocisarò [I will be there], meant to further predicate personal engagement and individual commitment. The use of the first-person pronoun stresses individual agency. The choice of the locative pronoun (*ci*) suggests that “we” all knew where the march would be: It was meant to provide a sense of proximity, a community based on common knowledge and a reciprocal commitment. The #iocisarò campaign relied heavily on images, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. One party official holding a sign for the “iocisarò” mobilization campaign.**

The majority of the tweets and images continued to emphasize the benign nature of the movement against accusations coming from progressive movements that it was inspired by racism. One example is the image in Figure 4, designed to underline the compassionate nature of the manifestation.



**Figure 4. Baby with a "Stop Invasione" bib, part of the "iocisarò" mobilization campaign**

As Salvini stated in one of his replies following this tweet, this photograph was sent to the Lega leader by "concerned parents who fight for the future of their children." The text of the tweet reads: "Even baby [NAME] from [LOCATION] says #Stopinvasione #iocisarò." The image of a baby comforted by a teddy bear wearing a Lega Nord headband and protected by a Stop Invasione bib invoked tenderness and empathy while contributing to the representation of a community in which family values are central.

### ***The Immigrants***

Whereas Salvini had represented members of the in-group as peace-loving, nice-looking people, a different portrayal was reserved for the immigrants. In this section, I analyze three main themes used to represent and predicate the out-group.

### ***Immigrants as Invaders***

The invasion metaphor is widely used among ultraright groups. It is based upon the perception that immigrants indulge in (inferior) lifestyles and adhere to beliefs, values, and religions that are perceived as antagonistic to those of the host nation. This relates to fears of racial contamination, based on the assumption that immigrants are not White Caucasians and will therefore "overwhelm . . . the racial integrity" of the nation (O'Brien 2003, p. 42).

Needless to say, there is no invasion. In Italy, for example, a country of more than 60 million people, noncitizens accounted for only 8.2% of the total population in 2016 (in 2014, that was about 7%), producing approximately 8.9% of the country's gross domestic product (Guadagnucci, 2014).

Given that there is no real enemy, one has to be created. Visuals are some of the most powerful ways to achieve this aim, as "choices of visual elements and features do not just represent the world, but constitute it" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 19). In fact, in a digital environment where pictures can be easily appropriated and manipulated, visuals can be created to support referential and predicational patterns aimed at representing immigrants as enemies. We see this at play in the sample, with image after image reinforcing the idea of an impending threat. This was evident in all the visuals, especially those used in the phase leading to the march, when memes circulated to promote a "tweet storm" planned for October 18. In Figure 5, we can see, side-by-side, a meme (Figure 5a) and the original picture (Figure 5b).



**Figures 5a and 5b. One of the memes circulating online in preparation for the "tweet storm" and the corresponding original photograph.**

According to an image-recognition search using Google Images, the original photograph had been manipulated by a variety of sources prior to being transformed into one of #Stopinvasione's favorite memes. Blogger Leonardo Cavaliere (2014) had first picked it up for an article on his blog, *Minori Stranieri non Accompagnati*, advocating for the protection of underage war victims. The article was meant to call attention to the impact of the Libyan civil war, and indeed, one of the tags was "refugee camps in Libya." The original picture shows a green flag flying in the upper far-left corner, probably the revolutionary flag adopted by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Perhaps the picture was taken before the demise of the North African leader.

Other similar images appeared during the premarch phase. The visuals shown in Figures 6a and 6b reinforced the referential and predicational strategies used to incite fear of a mass of people, dangerous and threatening, to promote the tweet storm planned for the day of the mobilization.



**Figures 6a and b: Two more memes circulating online in preparation for the "tweet storm."**

The original photograph used for the first meme (Figure 6a) shows dozens of people sitting on folded mattresses and cardboard boxes riding on a truck. In the meme, the bottom text covers the wheels of the vehicle, and as a result, the image looks even more surreal: like a cloud made of human bodies floating between the sky and the sand, like a looming storm moving through the desert. The text of this message announces the tweet storm "against clandestines and their masters."

The boat full of people in the second meme (Figure 6b) resembles images from the 1991 "Albanian Exodus," when tens of thousands of people from the Balkan state arrived at Italian ports following the collapse of their government. The huge crowd waiting on the shore must have been Photoshopped.

In critical discourse studies, we understand that communication happens through a "system of choices" that the speaker has at his or her disposal. Therefore, we need to ask "what options communicators use, why they use them and what the consequences of those choices are" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 15). Why these images, and what was the purpose of these choices? We know that "semiotic choices are able to signify broader sets of associations that may not be overtly specified" (p. 15) and, especially on a social media platform like Twitter, the association between words and visuals can reveal the racist beliefs that mobilized this particular march.

Throughout the sample, the faceless crowd is a key visual metaphor, strictly related to the overall strategy of creating the category of the immigrants and their impending invasion. Richardson and Colombo (2013) found that Lega had used similar images (the horde) for its 2002 political campaign but had later replaced those images with images of a Native American man to symbolize the consequences of a lack of border control upon native populations. The Native American imagery, frequently used by neofascists proponents of ethnopluralism in Europe, was meant to convey the notion that Lega was not a racist organization but one that embraced pluralism, as long as each ethnic group remained in its own territory. I



found no memes using images of Native Americans in the Twitter sample. Perhaps the fact that the image of the horde was being brought back into circulation for the 2014 march might indicate its resilience among anti-immigrationist activists as a sort of enemy archetype.

### ***Immigrants as Criminals***

Once immigrants had been dehumanized through the use of these objectifying metaphors, the next step of representing them as having no other agency than that of committing crimes was a natural progression. Indeed, the topos of immigrants as criminals dominated the sample, especially after the march was over. At that point, the ultraright news handle @piovegovernolad flooded the hashtags, accusing immigrants of all kinds of crimes (e.g., rape of young girls and octogenarians, reckless driving, assaults on unarmed citizens and politicians, drug consumption and smuggling).

### ***Immigration as Islamic Invasion***

References to Islam and Muslims were relatively few in the sample, which was surprising given the pervasiveness of Islamophobic discourse among ultraright groups in general (see, e.g., Jackson, 2014) and Lega Nord in particular (Avanza, 2010; Caldiron, 2001). This was even more surprising given that, according to media reports, Salvini had planned to stop in front of City Hall during the march to protest the building of a mosque nearby. Posters ridiculing then Minister of Foreign Affairs Angelino Alfano (renamed by the militants "Al-Fano," with a Middle Eastern-sounding last name), accused of favoring illegal immigration, that showing him wearing a long beard and a turban appeared on media reports but were nowhere to be found in the sample. The national dailies *La Repubblica* and *Il Manifesto* reported anti-Muslim taunts at the march, but there were no echoes of those on Twitter either. This is certainly an example of how a single focus on one social media platform, without contextual knowledge, could have been misleading.

The sample includes a total of nine references to Islam. Of those, I focus on the two retweets from Salvini that appeared on the day of the march. The fact that these were some of the most retweeted messages in the sample (one was retweeted 36 times; the other 35) is an indication of the echo of Islamophobic references among ultraright militants. In the first retweet, the secretary-general declared his sympathy toward Russia, Italy's best friend in the fight "against Islamic terrorism." In this case, by associating Islam with terrorism, Salvini gave voice to the "topos of danger" (Wodak, 2015, p. 159), part of the neo-orientalist discourse that "associates Islamic politics exclusively with violence, authoritarianism, [and] terrorism" (Richardson, 2009, p. 357).

The second retweet arrived shortly thereafter. In it, Salvini promised, "Not even a mosque will be built for those who do not recognize women's rights!" Here, the then secretary-general continued along another trope according to which Islam is inherently against women's rights. Wodak (2015) has underlined the irony of this kind of discourse, whereby "many men have [suddenly] become concerned with women's liberties and . . . rights" (p. 159). Certainly the oppression of women is endemic to patriarchal societies and to many religions, yet it is ironic that people such as Salvini and, more generally, ultraright militants present themselves as those who espouse the cause of women's liberation. In fact, this irony was not lost on antiracist activists, who replied in earnest. One person asked rhetorically: "Should we also destroy all the



churches?”, referring to the Catholic Church’s less-than-stellar reputation in fighting for gender equality. Another remarked sarcastically, “Right, because instead in Italy for sure we respect women: one is dead every two days killed by [an Italian] relative,” a reference to the rising number of *femminicidi* (gender-motivated murders of women at the hands of men) in the country.

Salvini himself has been called out for sexist remarks. The best-known example of objectification of women perpetrated by the Lega leader is the use of a larger-than-life inflated plastic doll representing Laura Boldrini (former president of the Chamber of Deputies) brought on stage and taunted during rallies, including during the spring 2018 political campaign. Misogynist references to Boldrini are also present in the Twitter sample, with Afrophobic comments about the president’s supposed sexual preferences for “black males,” which would somehow explain her proimmigration positions.

### ***Lega’s Communication Strategies***

Although the analytical focus of this article is Twitter, it is important to provide a context for the militants’ broader communication strategies. In fact, research has shown that social media only “complement” other media uses (Haunss, 2015), and indeed, activists use social media together with “traditional mass media, other forms of digital communication and face-to-face communication” (p. 26) to network with and reach out to a variety of publics.

Lega Nord activists have a long established relationship with traditional media. At the beginning of the movement, the Italian media system had failed to understand Lega’s “potential for expansion” (Biorcio, 2003, p. 91). This lack of representation, however, was short-lived, as it began to change after the party’s first electoral successes in the early 1990s, when the media “sought to redeem their delayed response . . . [and began] look[ing] at society from the same standpoint, and with the same interpretative models, as did Lega Nord” (p. 91).

Indeed, since then, mainstream media have contributed positively “towards representing Lega Nord . . . as an authentic expression of society” (Biorcio, 1997, p. 73) and the legitimate interpreter of northern interests and values. More and better representation has not merely been anecdotal; rather, it has been the result of structural changes, occurring in particular within the public service broadcaster RAI. Indeed, since the early 1990s, thanks to a practice known as *lottizzazione*—or, the sharing of power inside the broadcaster on the basis of party affiliation (Mancini, 2009)—RAI began to hire members of various ultraright parties, including Lega Nord, for important editorial and management positions (Padovani, 2008). This naturally contributed to more sympathetic and attentive coverage.

Although there is no space here to qualitatively analyze mainstream media coverage of the march, a cursory review shows that overall benevolent coverage continued to characterize the reporting on national news, especially in newspapers such as *Corriere della Sera*, the Milanese-based Italian newspaper of record, and even *La Repubblica*, a left-leaning daily, which allowed space for Salvini and other leaders to express their motivations for the march. Excerpts from interviews with the Lega leader repeating that this was simply a march against illegal immigration and that Lega was not racist constituted a large part of the reporting. Moreover, a host of ultraright national newspapers such as *Libero*, *Secolo XIX*, and *Il Giornale*, and numerous local and regional

news outlets, including MBNews, BergamoNews, MilanoToday, and CronacaOssoana, provided extensive and overall positive coverage.

Lega's love-hate relationship with the "elite" media, publicly shamed but always pursued, was evident. Although on Twitter Salvini would scorn them for underreporting the party's successes, he took advantage of the many invitations he received to participate in some of the most coveted prime-time talk shows on Italian TV, including *Porta a Porta* and *Uno Mattina* on RAI1, the public broadcaster's flagship channel; *Agora* on RAI3; and *TgCom24*, a news bulletin on the commercial broadcaster Mediaset.

Salvini and his militants frequently addressed mainstream media on Twitter, forwarding pictures and videos depicting a crowded Piazza Duomo, full of sarcastic remarks accusing those media of downplaying the magnitude of the crowd. Tweets of an ecstatic Salvini, with pictures taken from the podium just minutes before addressing the crowd, were among the most retweeted messages. *Corriere della Sera* was one of the main addressees of these tweets. TV talk shows and media personalities were also frequently addressed.

Ultraright movements' self-produced media have also been key factors in their growth. In this regard, Lega's own channels of communication are prime examples of what Downing (2001) defined as "repressive radical media." As independent radio stations flourished in the mid-1970s and state subsidies poured in to support political party publications and expand the pluralism of information, Lega was one of the first parties to take advantage of these opportunities by establishing its own newspaper, *La Padania*; its own radio station, *Radio Padania Libera*; and its own TV network, *TelePadania*.

After taking office at the end of 2013, Salvini announced plans to shut down those media outlets, as costs of keeping them up were growing while the popularity of the Internet and social platforms was intensifying (Lombardo, 2015). Yet during the march, these outlets seemed to be fully functioning, contributing interviews and live reporting and other original content.

The party's website was the central communication hub for the march, with a banner and a page dedicated to it and various links for logistical support and information. The site even featured a ride-sharing app created for participants to plan their trips that also provided contacts and phone numbers and schedules of chartered buses leaving from all over the country, including cities in southern Italy and the Islands (not Lega's typical territory). Flyers with the Stop Invasione logo were also available to download. A link to Lega's gadgets store included key chains, pens, balloons, hooded shirts with the march logo, and a variety of the party's flags (Lega Nord, 2014). Lega's social media accounts were also very active. They included the party's official Facebook and Twitter accounts in addition to the accounts of regional party chapters and, of course, Salvini's and other top leaders' individual accounts.

Face-to-face communication and strong personal ties of friendship and camaraderie are also key "facilitators of collective action" (Diani, 2004, p. 352). We know that Lega Nord has been masterful in building a close-knit network of grassroots activists since its early days (Avanza, 2010). Local sections of the party were very active in organizing presentations and booths in the weeks leading to the march to get people to sign up. The "iocisarò" campaign on Twitter was perhaps an extension of that strategy, trying to reproduce that sense of closeness and community on the social media platform.

### **The Proimmigration Discourse**

A hegemony critique, aimed at bringing to the surface oppositional discourses, together with an in-depth reading of the tweets, allows us to pay attention to alternative linguistic formations and strategies, even when they are quantitatively small and might have otherwise gone undetected. Indeed, an in-depth reading of the sample revealed that, whereas the anti-immigration connotation of #Stopinvasione reflected the hegemonic discourse within the ultraright, progressives and antiracist activists and movements used the same hashtag to subvert its original meaning using phrases such as “#Stopinvasione of the Lega Nord” and “#Stopinvasione of Lega Nord militants.”

Before continuing the analysis, it is important to underline that it is relatively easy to critically analyze what we disagree with (in this case, anti-immigration discourse) but more difficult to apply the same rigor to texts that we are in general agreement with (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Having said this, it is evident that the antiracist discourse on Twitter, although less voluminous, appears to be more polyphonic than the anti-immigration one. First of all, the most retweeted messages came from the @StopInvasione handle (see Table 2), an account created expressly for the countermarch. Groups such as Milano Meticcica, Milano Sciopera, Abitanti SanSiro, Cantiere, and other progressive groups and associations were behind this account. Thus, whereas the anti-immigration discourse was dominated by one individual account (Salvini's), representing more than 90% of the content, collective accounts led the proimmigration discourse on Twitter. I also noticed that activists very often seemed to intervene with ironic replies to Salvini's tweets. We can see, in other words, a more diffuse participation that is less top-down, with more content being circulated by individual accounts.

### ***Resemantization***

Twitter has been defined as a contemporary “linguistic market place” whose main currency is hashtags (Page, 2012, pp. 182–183). The most frequently used hashtags achieve the status of trending topics, whereas the sudden spike in the use of a certain hashtag creates a “tweet storm.” Yet, once a hashtag is used to mean something else, its initial function and intent are diluted according to a process that can be defined as “resemantization.”<sup>5</sup> The proimmigration groups chose this strategy to counter the discourse of the Lega Nord with the intent to flood the hashtags, particularly #Stopinvasione, used by the anti-immigration militants. This strategy was notably different than the one adopted by antifascist protesters in another case study in which activists created their own hashtags to separate their communication stream from that of the nationalist groups they were opposing in the streets (Neumayer & Valtysson, 2013). In Figures 7a and 7b, we see one of the first examples of such a resemantization strategy, a retweet announcing the antiracist march using the hashtag #Stopinvasione:

---

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Paolo Frascà, University of Toronto, for his suggestions about the role of resemantization in countering dominant discourses on social media.



**Figures 7a and b. One of the tweets from @Stop Invasione announcing the antiracist march, and the accompanying flyer.**

The text itself, and the two logos at the bottom of the image, can be defined as historical resemantization: the reappropriation of what Milan means for its citizens given Italy's World War II history. The text of the tweet (Figure 7a) reads: "The one who has Milan in their heart says #Stopinvasione of *leghisti* [Lega Nord militants] and fascists." The flyer (Figure 7b) repeats: "Those Who Love Freedom Hate Racism. Stop Lega Nord." The six-petal leaf inside the letter "O" in "STOP" represents the Lega Nord logo. At the bottom of the images, we can see the signatures of two collectives behind the proimmigration march: on the left, the circle with a black border and white block letters reads: "Those who love freedom hate Lega Nord." Inside the circle, a green stylized person is throwing the six-petal leaf in a garbage can. On the right is the symbol of the international antifascist movement Antifa.

A hegemony critique encourages us to reflect upon the fact that emancipation and a more just society cannot be achieved without emancipation of one's own consciousness, and a heightened historical awareness is certainly a key component of this process. In fact, the historical context is fundamental to understanding the meaning of freedom in a city such as Milan, the headquarters of the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia, the Partisans' armed insurgency against the Nazi-fascist occupation (September 9, 1943, to April 25, 1945). After the war, the city was decorated with the Republic's Gold Medal for its role in the Liberation. This is the necessary context for interpreting the series of tweets emphasizing the importance of freedom: In post-World War II Italy, freedom means freedom from fascism and Nazism.

Moreover, an expansive conceptualization of the role of organic intellectuals is also part of the strategy of creating a new cultural leadership. We see this at play in the campaign to subvert the hashtag #Stopinvasione, which began with pictures of playwright and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Dario Fò and rapper

Fedez circulating on Twitter on October 17, showing them holding a sign that read: "I Say #Stopinvasione of the #LegaGreatThief" (Figure 8).



**Figure 8. A tweet from @Stopinvasione, with pictures of Dario Fò and Fedez, kicks off the anti-Lega, antiracist march.**

The hashtag #Legaladrona ("Lega the Great Thief," Figure 8) was meant to draw attention to the criminal charges (which, in 2017, would become criminal convictions) against the former Lega leadership accused of embezzling the party's funds. Lega Nord had often accused the central government of spending the money of taxpayers (from the north) for funding welfare programs (in the south), so these allegations were particularly damning. Throughout the 1990s, the Lega Nord campaign slogan had been "Roma Ladrona" [Rome the Great Thief]: Now it was the Lega itself being accused of stealing.

#### **Additional Strategies**

**Anti-fascism.** Historical references drawn from the repertoire of antifascist militancy were widely used. Some examples: "Stop the invasion of leghisti [Lega activists] and neo-fascists . . . Milan loves freedom"; "Partisans in every neighborhood against fascism and racism"; "#fascists and #racists? Look out, as in Italy there is no room for them any longer." In this last tweet, the reference is to the events that led to the apprehension and execution of Benito Mussolini on May 28, 1945, killed together with a small group of former leaders of the regime by a commando unit of partisans, and then hanged in Piazzale Loreto in downtown Milan. The tweet is intended as a warning to the ultraright militants: "Watch out, it is all sold out for you in Milan; we got rid of people like you years ago!"

**Irony.** Researchers studying the tactics of contestation on Twitter have found that humor and playfulness have been used frequently among antifascist activists (Neumayer & Valtysson, 2013). Also, in the case of this study, irony was often injected in the discourse. I noticed, for instance, various plays on words in strings of tweets addressed to CasaPound Italia, the neofascist group that had also joined the anti-immigration march: "Mi confondo sempre è caccaPound o CasaClown?" [I am always confused: is it ShitPound or HouseClown?], asked one of the antiracist activists. Here, the author replaced the letter *s* of *casa* (home) with two letter *c*'s, which modified the meaning of the word from *casa* [home] to *cacca* [shit], and then played with the sound of the second word, *Pound* (Ezra Pound is considered a hero by Italian fascists), which became "clown." Another example was the use of the made-up handle @CapaSound: *Capa* in the Neapolitan dialect means "head," although the term can also be used to mean a "fool head."

**Metaphors.** The warlike invasion metaphor was also a central one in the antiracist discourse, as in this tweet: "The only real invasion is of the greens, either they are UFOs, or they are [Lega Nord]." Here the "greens" referred to the green-shirt-wearing Lega militants, as if to say that they were, like aliens in UFOs, not fully human or other than human. Activists used the invasion metaphor also to refer to themselves, as in this tweet: "anti-racist Milan invades the city." Another warlike metaphor characterized the announcement of the anti-tweet storm campaign, as in a string of tweets calling for a "cyberwar."

### **Other Communication Strategies**

Activists attached links to websites to provide logistics about the march and circulate damning information about Lega, including fact sheets about the various charges of corruption and embezzlement of public funds against its leadership. News releases, planned for the days immediately before the march, were also part of the antiracist collective's strategy to inform the public at large.

Mainstream media did report on the antiracist march. However, with the exception of the daily *Il Manifesto*, traditionally close to progressive movements, those reports were relatively brief and stereotypically referred to the activists as *antagonisti* (antagonists), a pejorative appellation. To my surprise, in the sample I did not find much indication that antiracist activists were interacting with mainstream media. I would have expected more exchanges at least with a newspaper like *Il Manifesto*, and TV channels like RAI3, historically a left-leaning channel.

Finally, activists' self-made short documentaries, of high production value, circulated on Twitter. Those documentaries, showcasing stories of how residents in low-income areas of Milan, irrespective of their nationality, were able to work in solidarity to avoid eviction, were effective in convening a different narrative, one that spoke of the importance of standing together against oppression.

### **Conclusion**

This study revealed a continuous use of typical anti-immigrationist metaphors on the part of Lega activists, similar to those the party had used earlier in its history (Richardson & Colombo, 2013), and to those used by ultraright politicians in other countries and historical periods (O'Brien, 2003; van der Valk, 2003). Indeed, the invasion metaphor has reached a hegemonic standing, capable of coalescing the right

and the ultraright, galvanizing attention while instilling irrational fears. The metaphor of the faceless mass, the horde, is intimately associated with that of the invasion, and it, too, holds wide currency, especially among activists, as this study underlines. It is interesting to notice that whereas critical discourse studies have traditionally focused on the discourse produced by ultraright leaders and party propaganda, this study has provided us with a window through which to investigate activists' contributions to the perpetuation of that discourse.

Metaphors are fundamental to the construction of social reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and it is discouraging to observe that bigotry and misrepresentation continue to infest the discourse on immigration. Scholars also argue that metaphors, especially in the case of political communication, are often "deliberate" choices (Musolff, 2011). Although the repertoire of immigration-related metaphors might be repetitive to the point of "cliché" (p. 14), as this present study confirms, the question of their deliberateness, their vitality and effectiveness, their intentionality among the militants themselves, is dense with social and political significance.

Indeed, it has been documented that once anti-immigrationist metaphors become accepted and internalized, actions of "self-defense" on the part of the host community and repressive public policies might ensue (O'Brien, 2003). In Italy, for instance, the number of reported hate crimes has risen considerably since the late 2000s: from 134 cases in 2009 to 472 in 2013; of these, 41% were classified as due to racism and xenophobia (Scaramella, 2016). Hate crimes against Muslims have also increased: According to police reports, by 2014 they had surpassed anti-Semitic hate crimes (Scaramella, 2016). The predisposition to understand immigration as an invasion might also explain why an *Ius Soli* legislation proposal, granting citizenship rights to those born on Italian soil from immigrant parents, never gathered enough votes in the parliament since being proposed in June 2017.

The analysis in this study showed that the anti-immigrationist and antiracist discourses differed in content and structural elements. A top-down pattern characterized the discourse in favor of the anti-immigration march, with Salvini as the author of most of the content. For the majority of Lega's militants, activism on Twitter consisted of forwarding the secretary-general's messages, thus amplifying their resonance.

Compared with the anti-immigration discourse, the participation of antiracist activists was more choral and specifically focused on interjecting into the dominant discourse. Individual users engaged with Salvini's tweets directly, with facts, irony, and sarcasm. Their replies pointed out the inconsistencies and contradictions of Salvini's discourse, as the example of the replies to his Islamophobic messages demonstrate. This, combined with other forms of political actions (online, in face-to-face communication, demonstrations in the streets), is a form of hegemony critique.

The antiracist march was well attended. It is important to push back and to show that progressive alliances are not afraid. The strategy of resemantization was meant to do just that: As explained, in one of the tweets, the intent of the proimmigration activists was to take Milan back and to "flood the streets as well as the hashtags." *Milan* became a metonymy for antiracism; its heroic role in the Resistance was a central part of the discursive strategy of the countermarch. On the other hand, it was somewhat surprising to notice a lack of progressive activists' interaction with mainstream media on Twitter. It is important to

interact with those media and find potential allies. A broader focus, including more online observations and interviews with activists, might have helped clarify their strategy in this regard.

The two discourses were also similar in some of the linguistic strategies they adopted (the use of the invasion and war-related metaphors, for instance). This is understandable given the context of the protest and the need to interject into the anti-immigration discourse. Yet, in an effort to build a new hegemony, it is important to be proactive and to create imaginative and creative metaphors to open up new meanings and understandings of immigration.

This study developed around a strong focus on Twitter, which can be misleading at times, as the example of the Islamophobic discourse demonstrates. References to Islam seemed minimal on Twitter but acquired meaning when analyzed within the context of Lega's history and in relationship to what was happening in the streets. Future studies should strive to combine a rigorous analysis of social media discourse vis-à-vis systematic examinations of other media and communication practices.

### References

- Atton, C. (2006). Far-right media on the Internet: Culture discourse and power. *New Media & Society*, 8(4), 573–587.
- Avanza, M. (2010). The Northern League and its “innocuous” xenophobia. In A. Mammone & G. Veltri (Eds.), *Italy today* (pp. 131–142). London, UK: Routledge.
- Biorcio, R. (1997). *La padania promessa* [The promised Padania]. Milan, Italy: il Saggiatore.
- Biorcio, R. (2003). The Lega Nord and the Italian media system. In G. Mazzoleni, J. Stewart, & B. Horsfield (Eds.), *The media and neo-populism* (pp. 71–94). London, UK: Praeger.
- Caldiron, G. (2001). *La destra plurale* [The plural right]. Rome, Italy: Manifestolibri.
- Cavaliere, L. (2014, July 30). Libia: Molte vittime tra rifugiati [Libya: Many victims among the refugees]. *Minori Stranieri non Accompagnati* [Web log]. Retrieved from <http://minoristranierinonaccompagnati.blogspot.com/2014/07/libiamolte-vittime-tra-rifugiati-anche.html>
- Cremonesi, M. (2014, October 20). La svolta “nazionalista” della Lega [The Lega's nationalist turn]. *Corriere della Sera*, p. 11.
- Diani, M. (2004). Networks and participation. In D. Snow, S. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 339–361). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.



- Downing, J. H. (2001). Repressive radical media. In J. H. Downing, T. Villarreal Ford, G. Gil, & L. Stein (Eds.), *Radical media* (pp. 88–96). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Eatwell, R. (2004). *Fascism and the extreme right*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Ebata, M. (1997). Right-wing extremism: In search of a definition. In A. Braun & S. Scheinberg (Eds.), *The extreme right, freedom and security at risk* (pp. 12–35). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fella, S., & Ruzza, C. (2006). Changing political opportunities and the re-invention of the Italian right. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 8(2), 179–200.
- Fuchs, C. (2016). Racism, nationalism and right-wing extremism online: The Austrian presidential election 2016 on Facebook. *Momentum Quarterly—Zeitschrift für sozialen Fortschritt*, 5(3), 172–196.
- Gramsci, A. (2014). *Quaderni del carcere* [Prison notebooks] (4<sup>th</sup> ed. V. Gerratana, Ed.). Turin, Italy: Einaudi.
- Guadagnucci, L. (2014, September 22). Qui nessuno ci vuole invadere [Here nobody wants to invade us]. *Altreconomia*, 163. Retrieved from [http://www.altreconomia.it/?url\\_dettaglio=4790](http://www.altreconomia.it/?url_dettaglio=4790)
- Hauß, S. (2015). Promise and practice in studies of social media and movements. In L. Dencik & O. Leistert (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on social media and protest* (pp. 13–34). London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ignazi, P. (1992). The silent counter-revolution. *European Journal of Political Research*, 22(1), 3–34.
- Jackson, P. (2014). 2083—A European declaration of independence: A license to kill. In M. Feldman & P. Jackson (Eds.), *Doublespeak: The rhetoric of the far right since 1945* (pp. 81–100). Stuttgart, Germany: Ibidem-Verlag.
- Jackson, P., & Feldman, M. (2014). Introduction. In M. Feldman & P. Jackson (Eds.), *Doublespeak: The rhetoric of the far right since 1945* (pp. 7–35). Stuttgart, Germany: Ibidem-Verlag.
- Lakoff, J., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lega Nord. (2014). Stop Invasione [Stop invasion]. Retrieved from <https://www.leganord.org/il-movimento/organi-federali/202-eventi/stop-invasione>
- Lombardo, I. (2015, October 1). Addio Padania: Dopo giornale e tv, Salvini spegne la radio [Goodbye Padania: After newspaper and TV, Salvini shuts down the radio]. *La Stampa*. Retrieved from <http://www.lastampa.it/2015/10/01/italia/addio-padania-dopo-giornale-e-tv-salvini-spegne-la-radio-SS5TQHzTyjEvrCUYAabAHO/pagina.html>

- Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Mancini, P. (2009). *Elogio della lottizzazione* [In praise of *lottizzazione*]. Bari, Italy: Laterza.
- Milan, S. (2015). Mobilizing in times of social media: From a politics of identity to a politics of visibility. In L. Dencik & O. Leistert (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on social media and protest* (pp. 53–72). London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mingoia, M. (2014, October 21). Salvini, svolta nazionale: "Pronta la Lega del Sud. Io fascista? È ridicolo" [Salvini, national turn: "Ready for the Southern League. I, a fascist? It is ridiculous"]. *Il Giorno*. Retrieved from <https://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/cronaca/salvini-lega-1.323276>
- Mosco, V. (2009). *The political economy of communication*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Mudde, C. (2000). *The ideology of the extreme right*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Musolff, A. (2011). Migration, media and "deliberate" metaphors. *Metaphorik*, 21, 1–19.
- Neumayer, C., & Valtysson, B. (2013). Tweet against Nazis? Twitter, power, and networked publics in anti-fascist protests. *MedieKultur*, 55, 3–20.
- O'Brien, G. (2003). Indigestible food, conquering hordes, and waste materials: Metaphors of immigrants and the early immigration restriction debate in the United States. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 18(1), 33–47.
- Padovani, C. (2008). The extreme right and its media in Italy. *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 753–770.
- Padovani, C. (2016). The media of the ultra-right: Discourse and media activism online. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 15(4), 399–429.
- Page, R. (2012). The linguistics of self-branding and micro-celebrity in Twitter: The role of hashtags. *Discourse & Communication*, 6(2), 181–201.
- Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination rhetorics of racism and anti-Semitism*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Richardson, J. (2009). "Get shot of the lot of them": Election reporting of Muslims in British newspapers. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43(3), 355–377.
- Richardson, J., & Colombo, M. (2013). Continuity and change in anti-immigrant discourse in Italy. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 12(2), 180–202.

Scaramella, C. (2016). *Discorsi d'odio e social media* [Discourses of hate and social media]. Rome, Italy: ARCI.

Thomas, P. (2010). *The Gramscian moment: Philosophy, hegemony and Marxism*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

van der Valk, I. (2003). Right-wing parliamentary discourse on immigration in France. *Discourse & Communication, 14*(3), 309–348.

van Dijk, T. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Wodak, R. (2013). "Anything goes": The Haiderization of Europe. In R. Wodak, M. Khosravini, & B. Mral (Eds.), *Right-wing populism in Europe* (pp. 23–37). London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Wodak, R., & Busch, B. (2004). Approaches to media texts. In J. H. Downing (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of media studies* (pp. 105–122). London, UK: SAGE Publications.