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Right-Wing Populism and the Representation of Immigrants on Social Media

A Critical Multimodal Analysis

Abstract

This paper presents a multimodal critical discourse analysis of a sample from a larger corpus of multimodal posts about immigration from the social media pages of right-wing populist leaders Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini. Drawing on Van Leeuwen's framework for the representation of social actors, we investigate how multimodal resources contribute to shaping immigration discourse and to its bias, highlighting exclusionary ideologies through the recontextualisation of social practices. Our analysis reveals how the strategic synergy of images, videos, slogan-like language and the social affordances of Web 2.0 enables the two leaders to spread their nativist propaganda and emphasise the view of immigrants as a threat to security. The othering of immigrants as non-natives is enacted through biased representation based on covert racist stereotypes. At the same time, visual anti-immigration rhetoric allows the leaders to "build their people" and self-promote their role as gate-keepers of the nation-state.

Keywords: *racist discourse, immigration, right-wing populism, critical discourse studies, multimodal critical discourse analysis, social media*

The rights of men, as citizens of the world, shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality. We are speaking here [...] not of philanthropy, but of right; and in this sphere hospitality signifies the claim of a stranger entering foreign territory to be treated by its owner without hostility.[...] It is not a right to be treated as a guest to which the stranger can lay claim—a special friendly compact on his behalf would be required to make him for a given time an actual inmate, but he has a right of visitation. This right to present themselves to society belongs to all mankind in virtue of our common right of possession on the surface of the earth on which, as it is a globe, we cannot be infinitely scattered, and must in the end reconcile ourselves to existence side by side: at the same time, originally no one individual had more right than another to live in any one particular spot.

Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*

1. Introduction

Intensified contacts and massive multidirectional flows of people, goods, and news fostered by globalisation have turned the world into a liquid global village characterised by increased

mobility (Ritzer and Dean 2010). While greater liquidity and the porosity of political boundaries are critical factors in post-modern society, flows and fluidity do not always come without frictions (Bauman 2012).

One such friction today is represented by large-scale migrations and the growing hostility towards migrants¹ and refugees² worldwide. In 2019 the number of migrants globally reached 272 million, making 3,5% of the world population. The United States of America is the favoured destination, hosting 50.7 million immigrants, while Europe is the continent currently facing the highest pressure, with 82.3 million newcomers (UN DESA 2019). Many of these arrivals are voluntary, while 70.8 million involve forcibly displaced people as a result of persecution, conflicts, violence, or human rights violations. The 'refugee crisis' started around 2013 with the massive arrivals in Europe of people from other continents travelling across the Mediterranean Sea or overland, mainly due to the Syrian conflict, but also from other Middle-Eastern and African countries contributed to the phenomenon on an impressive scale. Moreover, the often ineffective and uncoordinated response by European Union institutions and its member states in facing a challenge of global proportions emphasised the fragmentation of the Eurozone paving the way for the rise of right-wing populist forces in defence of national borders and claiming to represent 'the true people' *versus* 'dangerous others' from outside (Wodak 2015).

At the same time, caravans of migrants on the move from Central and Latin America on account of critical geopolitical conditions, most recently in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, reignited anxieties about border security in the United States, where the US-Mexico border is a critical route for (undocumented) immigration.

In his last writing, Bauman (2018) pointed out that the recent global panic over immigration is caused by a failure to recognise that this migrant crisis cannot be monitored or contained based

¹ Migrant is an umbrella term currently not defined under international law reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students. (IOM for Migration 2019)

² A refugee is a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution, and their government cannot or will not protect them from those dangers. Refugees have a right to international protection based on the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugee. *Asylum seeker*, on the other hand, is a related term referring to an individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualised procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which it has been submitted. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every recognised refugee is initially an asylum seeker (UNHCR 2006).

on measures inherited from the solid era of territorial sovereignties, borders, and walls. Together with Umberto Eco (1997), who had foreseen this outcome twenty years earlier, he observes that what we are experiencing is not immigration, but migration, a self-propelling process, that, like natural phenomena, is uncontrollable and leads to geopolitical and societal transformations. Our urban environments have become a kaleidoscope of different cultures, but the multiculturalism ideally celebrated is not matched by a seemingly cosmopolitan awareness. Late-modern societies are still torn between the strategies of cultural assimilation and ejection of the others or, to match Lévi-Strauss's (1955) terminology, they are faced with a dualism between an anthropophagic strategy, aimed at the enforced assimilation of diversity, and an anthropoemic one, which consists in spitting out the deviants and keeping them outside society (Young 1999).

These two strategies are at the rhetorical core of many right-wing populist forces that have recently gained consensus all over Europe (e.g. *League* in Italy, *Rassemblement National* in France, *FPÖ* in Austria, *Freedom Party* in the Netherlands, *UKIP* and *Brexit Party* in the United Kingdom, *Vox* in Spain among others) promoting a Manichean vision of society, where 'the true people' are pitted against usurpers from outside (Wodak, KhosraviNik and Mral 2013; Wodak 2015). Exploiting the critical juncture of the growing disaffection of citizens towards traditional parties, representative democracy (Mair 2013) and EU institutions in a moment when the long-term consequences of the 2008 global economic crisis are still affecting many countries, these political actors play on people's fears to promote a nationalistic view of society with stricter borders and barriers. In the UK, after a profoundly divisive campaign led by Nigel Farage (who was the leader of *UKIP* at the time) with the mantra "we need to get back control of our borders," in June 2016 a referendum was passed for the exit of the country from the European Union. In Italy, at the same time, the *League*, a former ethno-regionalist party turned national, guided by Matteo Salvini, started gaining huge electoral consensus. It placed first in the 2018 political elections,³ following Salvini's pledge to deport 500.000 illegal immigrants, close ports, and stop the 'invasion' of people arriving on the Italian shores on boats, arguing that they would only raise the crime rate in the country (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017; Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018).

Similar views have been promoted and spread by Donald Trump since the inception of his presidential campaign in 2015 and throughout his administration. One of his first official acts

³ The *League (Lega)* placed first in the 2018 political elections as part of a centre-right coalition with *Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia)* and *Go, Italy (Forza Italia)*. The following year, it doubled its electoral consensus in the 2019 European elections.

immediately after taking office in 2017 was the so-called ‘Muslim ban,’ an executive order that lowered the number of refugees to be admitted into the US for that year, temporarily suspended the admission of refugees from Syria and other countries with large Muslim communities, including those not meeting adjudication standards under US immigration law for 90 days, and created a ‘blacklist’ of undesirable countries from which both visas and admissions were blocked. This move was apparently designed to protect the country from terrorism and, despite its limited duration, was met with a groundswell of protests throughout the country, as it primarily targeted people of Islamic faith. On the other hand, it also contributed to fuelling a climate of hate and scapegoating.

As a presidential candidate in 2015, Trump immediately vowed to curb both legal and illegal immigration to the US. His anti-immigration rhetoric, however, has been primarily directed against people of Mexican and Central American descent. From his mantra on the necessity to “build the wall,” promoting the extension of a barrier along the US-Mexico border to prevent “the Hispanic invasion,” to calling Mexico a country of “criminals and rapists,” and defining a series of countries as “shithole countries,” he *de facto* constructed a racist hierarchy with his language, placing whites over Asians, Latinxs and blacks (Kendi 2019).

Discourse lies at the heart of racism and discrimination. The usage of such expressions is not neutral nor accidental. On the contrary, it is part of a strategy founded on the rhetoric of fear (Wodak 2015). The way politicians talk about immigration and ethnic minorities in political speeches, through media coverage or social media channels, contributes to the legitimization of opinions, attitudes, and ideologies (Van Dijk 2002; 2013). Framing immigration as a problem, or stressing the security aspect constrains the view about the solutions needed to address the problem, thus pre-empting considerations and understanding of it in terms of civil rights or cheap labour issue, and plays a primary role in the spread of hate speech and discrimination against minorities at several levels in society (Van Dijk 2002; Lakoff 2014).

Part of the success of these new populist politicians stems from their ability to exploit the social affordances of the Internet as propaganda hubs for the promotion of their political agenda, thanks to the viral diffusion of polarising contents bypassing journalists or any type of gatekeepers (Engesser et al. 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). Political posts on social networks usually include multimodal contents, complex constructions in which the verbal code and other semiotic resources are integrated in the aim to persuade and often manipulate the recipient through the recontextualisation of social practices (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Van Leeuwen 2008; Kress 2011). Visuals, in particular, are highly resonant and may impact behaviours due to their emotional appeal, while the illusion of their authenticity often masks

the political value that these representations embody (Bleiker 2018). In this contribution, multimodal critical discourse analysis is employed for the analysis of a sample from a larger corpus of images and videos related to immigration retrieved from the social media pages of Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini in the period October 2018-June 2019. This study, which is part of a larger project on anti-immigration rhetoric in right-wing populism (Lorenzetti forthcoming), applies the visual representation of social actors as introduced by Van Leeuwen (2000; 2008), unveiling how images and videos are strategically combined with language as effective ideological tools to emphasise the view of immigrants as others and as a threat to security. The social affordances of Web 2.0 also enable the politicians to foreground their role as saviours of their country, and “build their people” by the exclusion of others.

2. Right-wing populism

The global rise of a plethora of heterogeneous populist forces in the last few years has led scholars to argue that we are experiencing a “populist zeitgeist” (Mudde 2004).

Populism is nothing new to the political scene and has been a reality in Europe and the Americas across time, even if it has often been characterised by episodic and context-specific upsurges (Canovan 1981; Kazin 1995; Taggart 2000). As a concept, it has been viewed as contested and mercurial (Panizza 2005) in academia, leading to a proliferation of diverging definitions, and is still ambiguously used across the media to describe a vast array of diversified political outlets. In recent years, however, a growing academic consensus has emerged for an ideational approach to populism (Mudde 2004; 2017; Mudde and Róvira Kaltwasser 2017) which also informs the present research.

Drawing on Freedman’s (1996) work on ideologies, Mudde (2004) defines populism as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ *versus* ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be the expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543). For Freedman (1996; 2017), a thin-centered ideology is one that does not provide an interpretive framework for all societal issues like full ideologies (e.g. liberalism, conservatism, or socialism) have sought to provide, but is restricted to a narrow core. Populism in Mudde’s (2004; 2017) ideational approach is therefore combined with a more stable host-ideology, which explains its oft-alleged malleability.

The political appeal to the people is a central element of democratic discourse, and all politicians of every political orientation address a people to win their votes and maximise electoral consensus. However, appeals to the people and to popular unity are not sufficient to grasp the

nature of populism. Other crucial features are the demand for direct democracy, and the fact that populist actors promote themselves as ‘change bringers,’ challenging established power holders and elite values. Populism is based on Abraham Lincoln’s definition of democracy as “government of the people, for the people, and by the people,” but the exact identity of the people is never specified, which leads to one of the paradoxes of populism: who is included and excluded from ‘the people’ is treated as a self-evident dogma, without taking into account cultural developments and societal cleavages (Pelinka 2013).

Much of the conceptual ambiguity inherent in populism stems from the vagueness of the concept ‘the people’ and its *denotatum* which, like Latin *populus* or Greek *dēmos*, are highly polysemous in character (see Lorenzetti 2016 for a brief overview of their senses). Canovan (1984; 1999) isolates three basic senses of ‘the people’:

- The political community as a whole, i.e. ‘the united people’ in a very inclusive sense;
- The people as a nation in an exclusionary/nativist way, i.e. ‘our people’ *versus* those who were not born here;
- The underdogs in contrast with a power class, thus referring to the less privileged majority inside the entire community.

However, the fact that in English the word *people* refers to “individuals in general,” Canovan (2004) argues, introduces additional elements of ambiguity, thus suggesting that the sovereign people are at the same time a collection of individuals (‘people in general’) and a collective entity. One of the most influential aspects of Laclau’s (2005a; 2005b) conceptualisation of populism as a transversal political logic is his acknowledgement that populists do not speak for some pre-existing people, but bring the entity ‘the people’ into being through a performative act of naming (Austin 1962) and narrative construction (Smith 2001). ‘The people’ is an empty signifier and embodies an ‘unachievable fullness,’ an immanent totality conjured as a political force in a performative fashion.

Populism may highlight different contents and themes based on the kind of enemy it is mobilising against and is overall founded on a Manichean dichotomy between an underdog (the people) and some usurpers exploiting or threatening them. Its argumentative frame is based on a structure through which “the crisis narrative of a people can be popularised, and a group can be mobilised” (Lee 2006, 363), while ‘the people’ and its enemy are construed as converse terms (Cruse 2000) in a symbiotic relationship. In whatever manner ‘the people’ and its values are

conceived, there must always be an enemy as a *conditio sine qua non* acting both as a definer of ‘the people’ and as a scapegoat for all societal ills.

The specific sense of ‘the people’ selected, together with the kind of enemy put in the foreground is crucial, among other characteristics, to distinguish between left-wing and right-wing populist forces. Both of them are (or claim to be) anti-elitist and exploit the gap inherent in many liberal democracies between promise and performance to strengthen the capacity of the people to exercise their rightful power. However, left-wing populists, who have a strong ethical idea of how society should be ruled, and aim at empowering citizens and involving them in the direct political decision-making process (Stavrakakis 2014; Gerbaudo 2018), emphasise a pyramidal view of society, where the people stand at the bottom of the social scale as the underdogs (DOWN) and are pitted against the economic and political oligarchs at the top (UP). Right-wing populist politicians, on the contrary, despite their being anti-establishment, do not stress an UP/DOWN societal dichotomy but construct a nuclear view of society based on an IN/OUT opposition, namely ‘the true people’ *versus* foreigners due to birth, citizenship, religion or race, viewed as usurpers. In such a nativist conception of the people, a fictitious ethno-national purity of a homogeneous people must be preserved and protected against outsiders who put it in danger. The belief in the idealised homogeneity of ‘us’ is correlated by the generalisation of the perceived danger from ‘them.’ Outsiders are at the same time considered different, not legitimately belonging to the in-group, less worthy and inferior, like the *pariah* in the Indian caste system. Moreover, a conspiracy between the two enemies, the elite, and the outsiders, is often envisaged to the detriment of ‘the true *inherently good* people.’

Parties pursuing the exclusion of or discrimination against specific social groups or minorities follow an ethno-nationalist and potentially racist agenda. They claim to speak on behalf of the people, but the identity of the people they are speaking for is entirely defined by the exclusion of others. Opposing multiculturalism, they tend to be obstructive to changes and may combine different political imaginaries and traditions, evoking some idyllic past in the form of identity narratives, or “heartland” (Taggart 2000) to create common ground with their “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), while the issues they emphasise in everyday politics depend on local concerns (Wodak 2015). Rewriting history is central to the right-wing populist project. While many leaders simplify complex issues constructing a perceived threat, be it Islam, or migrants in general, they flirt with fascism and nazism without openly disavowing the ideologies they represent or may endorse a Christian conservatist agenda often winking at white-supremacism (Kazin 1995; Pelinka 2013). An *ad hoc* revision (or recontextualisation) of historical events renders the fascist ideology of the past mythical rather than historical, which

is instrumental, not only to obscure its negative aspects but also to normalise the political agenda these leaders are pursuing.

For right-wing populists, “the flaunting of the sociocultural low” (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016), the use of anti-intellectualism, and the rhetoric of “common sense,” in an often coarse outspoken style crusading against the polished language of politically correct (Moffitt 2016; Gantt Shafer 2017), are key for spreading their message to ‘the common man.’ Such appeals are imbued with traditional or conservative values that are linked to an exclusionary and xenophobic rhetoric, while much of their success depends on performance strategies and the personalisation of the leader. In today’s society, the Internet and social media are the perfect stages for the populist performance.

2.1. Social media and populism

The impact of the Internet and digital technologies on the communication environment, and their strategic role for political communication has been recognised since Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign in 2008 (Owen 2017), where the huge presence of the candidate on Twitter and other social networks enabled him to tap into different audiences. On the one hand, the advent of Web 2.0 has introduced a new dynamic of communication breaking away from the traditional unidirectional one-to-many interface, potentially replaced by a many-to-many content flow (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016; KhosraviNik 2017). On the other, it has made an unprecedented number and range of tools available to political actors in order to spread their message, including new platforms, new outlets and social media sites in an increasingly hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013), where old and new media outlets coexist, compete and complement one another.

More recently, the role of social networks with their capacity for exponential dissemination has been underlined as a preferential channel for the populist propaganda in the case of Donald Trump’s winning electoral campaign (Demata 2018), the outcome of the Brexit referendum (Hänska-Ahy and Bauchowitz 2017; Wutz and Nugteren 2018), but also for the rise of grassroots protest movements, like *Occupy Wall Street* in the US, the *Indignados* in Spain, or the *Gilets Jaunes* in France (Grossman 2019), thus highlighting a more complex picture.

Social media have become strategic platforms for populists to represent the unrepresented, not only for their technical affordances but also for the meanings associated with them. As alternative media, acting as *cahiers de doléances* for people to vent their frustration towards the government or the economic recession, they are suitable for populists both on the left and on the

right of the political spectrum to counter the perceived pro-establishment bias of mainstream news media and intercept popular resentment (Gerbaudo 2018).

‘The common man’ addressed by the traditional populist logic on the web coincides with the generic internet user, perceived as highly isolated in today’s hyper-individualised society (Bauman 2012) and in need of being reintegrated into a social body. This subject is targeted based on the utopian presupposition that merely by going online, someone is likely to be a politically informed citizen suspicious of traditional media and bureaucracy (Gerbaudo 2014). Such a view, however, like the idyllic vision of ‘the people’ in populist discourse as inherently wise and good, is clearly an idealisation and a simplification, given the amount of misinformation circulating on the web (Valenzuela et al. 2019). Moreover, political engagement on social media does not necessarily coincide with serious commitment, but may simply be represented by acts of slacktivism, e.g. ‘liking’ posts, signing online petitions, changing one’s profile picture, or sharing contents with other internet users, whereby people “exercise a sense of moral justification without the need to actually engage” (Halupka 2014, 117).

The spread of contents on social media follows the logic of virality that Klinger and Svensson (2015, 1248) define as “network-enhanced word of mouth,” where popularity among like-minded people is critical for posts or information to acquire online salience and be shared with other netizens. Aggregative functionalities and ‘filter bubble’ tendencies favour homophily, i.e. “the tendency of similar individuals to form ties with each other” (Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson 2014, 318), thus promoting the formation of online like-minded crowds coming together in a sort of momentary fusion into a new collective identity.

Hence, social media, with their Web 2.0 interactive features, coupled with the possibility of gathering lonely crowds together based on a shared set of interests and values, facilitate the formation of bottom-up online grassroots movements with a demand for direct democracy. This is exemplified by the rise of social media movements, such as the *Indignados* in Spain, or *Occupy Wall Street* in the US, but also by the militant support provided to anti-establishment parties, like *Podemos* in Spain and the *Five Star Movement* in Italy (Gerbaudo 2014; Lorenzetti 2018).

The personal visibility of populist politicians is also enhanced in the digital environment, and the new hybrid media ecology enables them to pursue a double communicative strategy. On the one hand, they still rely on the visibility and ensuing popularity assured by the coverage of professional mass media. On the other, social media platforms allow them to bypass the role of journalists, or any gate-keeper to create a direct connection with the people and uncontestedly articulate their ideology (Engesser et al. 2017). Moreover, with the aid of this “one-step flow-of communication,” political propaganda does no longer need to be confined to specific electoral

periods or the television domain, but politicians may exploit specific events at any time to support political bias and spread their unfiltered message without external interferences and at relatively low costs (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018).

Social networks ensure these leaders the possibility of easily stagecrafting their self-presentation balancing the strategy of self-promotion as professional leaders with the advertising of their private *persona*, through privatisation, or intimisation, with an increased focus on the leader's personal life and qualities (Van Aelst, Sheaffer and Stanyer 2012; Bracciale and Martella 2017), but also relying on a simple outspoken style (Moffitt 2016). The first strategy is designed to emphasise the outstanding qualities of populist politicians as leaders and as outsiders caring for 'the people' and offering a simple solution for every complex issue, as opposed to their adversaries and the elite. Besides, intimisation helps them to reduce the distance with their potential electorate, presenting themselves as 'men of the people.' In such a way, populist politicians can skilfully "balance the ordinary with the extraordinary" (Moffitt 2016, 55).

Despite this feeling of "social presence" (Kruikemeier et al. 2013), which results in a stronger bond between leaders and their followers, direct connection between populist politicians and the people through digital platforms is only apparent. On the one hand, these leaders often rely on social media management teams to regularly update their digital profiles, which suggests that it is not always the politicians who write the online posts. On the other, direct interaction between the politicians and their base is also dubious. Exchanges are mostly vertical (one-to-many), with leaders posting, and while addressing their supporters as friends in an informal manner, they, in fact, treat them as helpers, asking them to share their posts, or spread the news to recruit additional supporters (Bonacina 2018).

Given the volatile and unstable nature of digital collectives (Han 2017), populist leaders carefully craft their propaganda to maximise endurable support and "build their people" (Smith 2001). This is facilitated by social media affordances that foster in-group communication and out-group demonisation, creating an eco-chamber that may insulate audiences from truth. Populist leaders can therefore easily mould their vision of the world and simplify an apparently complex reality into dichotomies, like 'friend' *versus* 'foe' and 'us' *versus* 'them.'

Populist discourse on social media often appears to be expressed in fragmented forms (Engesser et al. 2017) to gain in flexibility, mitigate its potentially disruptive force, and reach wider audiences, who can potentially tailor it to their own ideology. At the same time, the digital environment helps right-wing populist politicians spread their polarising message aimed at discriminating and ostracising others in overt as well as covert ways (KhosraviNik 2017).

Furthermore, right-wing populists profit from allies in ordinary internet users who may become the recipients, but also transmitters, of deceptively simple messages that invoke political terms heavily invested with symbolic meaning and emotional valence.

The verbal code is only one of the numerous resources available to communicate contents on social networks, where posts with pictures or videos have been found to generate higher engagement or reactions than contents without images (“How to Increase Facebook Engagement” 2019). In the next section, the role of multimodal posts and contents in the othering of minorities is examined.

3. The discourse of discrimination and its critical investigation at the multimodal level

Discourse plays a crucial role in the production and reproduction of discrimination and racism in society, both at the social and at the cognitive level (Van Dijk 2002). Discourse may be directly discriminatory, but the interplay of individual behaviours and institutional practices and policies also influences social cognition, acting on people’s mental models and frames. It occurs not only by reinforcing stereotypes and ideological stances, thus contributing to the ethnic consensus in white-dominated societies, but also by legitimising hate speech, harassment, and intolerance towards minorities (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Van Dijk 2002; Lakoff 2014; Wodak and Reisigl 2015). The political class have a special role in this process, given their preferential access to the public at large.

Racism can be defined as a social phenomenon that “inscribes itself in practices [...], discourses and representations articulated around stigmata of otherness” (Balibar 1991, 17-18). It mainly works by conferring the dominated group stereotyped features, and it is the combination of such practices of intolerance, discourses and representations based on biased stereotypes of otherness that enables us to account for the formation of racist communities.

Whilst real racism, with its explicit endorsement of racist ideologies, myths and symbols can be currently found only in extreme right movements usually ostracised from the political spotlight (Kazin 1995; Pelinka 2013), neo-racism in its manifestations tends to be very different from forms of slavery, segregation, and explicit derogation (Balibar 1991). New racism typically wants to prove itself democratic and respectable; hence it denies being racism at all, and due to its often subtle and indirect character, discourse is its primary setting of reproduction. What appears as ‘mere talk,’ far removed from forms of subjugation and segregation associated with the old practices of racism, may nevertheless be ultimately effective in marginalising and excluding specific minorities, since ethnic prejudices and ideologies are neither innate nor

spontaneous, but acquired and learned through communication, i.e. through text and talk (Van Dijk 2002; 2013).

The most prominent feature of new forms of racism is that the category ‘immigration’ today replaces the function that ‘race’ had for earlier racism. This is a racism without races developed in the era of decolonisation, with a reversal of population movement from territories that were former colonies to big cities in the industrialised world. Minorities are no longer portrayed as biologically inferior, but as different. This racism that Taguieff (2001) termed differentialist racism postulates an alleged insurmountability of cultural differences, without, at first glance, implying the superiority of certain groups of people over others, but only a cultural incompatibility due to different values, culture and lifestyle.

Differentialism posits the inevitability of group conflicts and the impossibility of conviviality among cultures. Its ultimate thesis is that it is necessary to keep ‘us’ separate from ‘them.’ Apparently denying an assumption of superiority of one culture over another, the different culture associated with minorities is *de facto* often presented as having deficiencies or pathologies that need to be corrected, or as deviant based on the moral values and norms established by dominant groups.

A rhetoric of exclusion and discrimination in political discourse is implemented at the linguistic level by typically emphasising the negative portrayal of the out-group, combined with a positive presentation of oneself (in-group), often coupled with the negation or mitigation of racism. It is the interplay of multiple strategies at the level of syntax, semantics, style, argumentation, and pragmatics (through implicature, presupposition and subtle insinuation) that produces discursive othering (Van Dijk 2002).

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) is a perspective of multidisciplinary discourse studies primarily interested in the ways social power abuse, discrimination, and inequality are enacted and reproduced through text and talk in the social and political contexts (Van Dijk 2015). Under this broad research paradigm, different perspectives and analytical approaches converge which utilise diverse methodological notions and tools to unveil how discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance. Within CDS, extensive scholarly research has been devoted to racism and racist discourse (e.g. Van Dijk 1992; 2002; Chilton 2004; Wodak and Reisigl 1999; 2015 among others), immigration (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Wodak 2015), and power abuse (KhosraviNink and Unger 2016; KhosraviNik 2017). Moreover, anti-immigration rhetoric and metaphors have also been extensively investigated (Charteris-Black 2006; Musolff 2015; Pinero-Pinero and Moore 2015) in the domains of politics, law, and the press.

However, meaning, discourses, and representations can also be realised through other semiotic modes (Machin and Mayr 2012), and so can power, truths, and interests (Machin 2013). While the general thrust of CDS has been towards the analysis of linguistic structures, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) moves towards a broader multimodal conception of discourse. By critically examining how discourses and ideologies are carried by language and other semiotic modalities (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Kress 2011; Machin and Mayr 2012; Machin 2013; Ledin and Machin 2020), it unveils how different semiotic resources are deployed in the representation of identities, actions, and circumstances and function to serve specific political interests, maintain social relations, and (re)produce dominant truths through the recontextualisation of social practices, as introduced by Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999).

Through the recognition that in multimodal *ensembles* meanings emerge contextually from the joint contribution of different semiotic resources, MCDA draws attention to the partiality of language as a bearer of meanings, suggesting a move beyond the pervasive notion of implicit meanings, since all modes play a role in constituting the meaning of a text, and to the recognition of semiotic work in terms of agency and mode (Kress 2011).

This study is set within the CDS research paradigm and involves a critical examination of the ways language and other semiotic modes contribute to the representation of immigrants and the phenomenon of immigration at large in right-wing populist discourse. The analysis in this paper draws on the social actor and on the visual representation of social actors proposed by Van Leeuwen (2008), which focuses on a) the way people are depicted and b) in what ways the depicted people are related to the viewer in terms of social distance, social relation, and social interaction.

In images, people may be represented as individuals, as collectives, by emphasising their specific characteristics, or those which associate them with a specific social type, as involved in some action, or by focusing on their visual categorisation realised through cultural attributes or stereotyped physical characteristics. Moreover, even the exclusion of key actors from a representation is often not accidental but designed to convey the symbolic idea of social exclusion.

Van Leeuwen (2008) outlines several strategies that contribute to the visual othering of people:

- Exclusion from the representation;
- Depiction as agents of criminal actions, or actions held in low esteem;
- Homogenisation into a group, thereby denying people their individuality;
- Negative cultural connotation or negative racial stereotyping.

As for the relation between the depicted people and the viewers, in pictures, physical distance is interpreted as symbolic distance, while the angle of the representation may suggest different relations between the people represented and the viewer. Specifically, the vertical angle is associated with power difference, while the horizontal angle concerns personal involvement (Van Leeuwen 2008; Ledin and Machin 2020). In this respect three possible strategies of othering are outlined, namely distancing, with a focus on the role of the represented people as strangers; disempowerment, which is achieved by depicting them as below us; and objectivation, through a non-frontal perspective, where the viewer becomes a *voyeur* on the scene.

4. Data presentation

For the purpose of analysing the visual representation of immigrants on the social media profiles of Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini, data collection has been carried out by manually scanning their social profile pages for the period ranging from October 2018 to June 2019. A total of 80 posts (40 for each politician) have been collected and analysed with a focus on the topic ‘immigration.’ All the posts in our corpus are multimodal. Most of them contain an image, and a few short videos have been included as well due to their relevance to the topic under investigation. The detailed analysis in this paper focuses on a sample of the multimodal posts collected.

Both leaders have a personal profile on the micro-blogging site Twitter, on Facebook, and Instagram. Twitter is notoriously Trump’s favourite social network and the one where he is most popular, with currently 79.5 million followers. Since his candidacy in 2015, Trump has constantly used Twitter as a preferred channel over press conferences, also due to his disdain for the alleged “fake news media.” As President, he keeps using his private account (@realDonaldTrump) to disseminate his ideology with an impactful, simple and straightforward language of common and idiosyncratic expressions (“the swamp”), and catchphrases to demonise opponents (“Crooked Hillary”), while media channels regularly report his tweets as news (Demata 2018). From his Facebook account, where he has 27 million followers, he does not post as many updates as from Twitter. Finally, on Instagram, he is followed by 19.5 million people, and updates from his profile range from 1 to 3 per day.

Salvini also uses social networks massively, generating a flow of information in real time that enables people to follow his actions live, as he posts intensely throughout the day. One of the critical factors behind his huge presence and successful performance on social networks is a

specially designed software nicknamed ‘the Beast.’ This software is alleged to monitor thematic fields to determine the media agenda and the perception that Italians have of his party’s core issues through big data analytics and sentiment analysis, drawing attention to the engagement of each post and the typology of users that have interacted with it (Guerra 2019).

Consequently, the leader’s strategy can be modified accordingly to stimulate positive feelings as well as anger or fear. He has been especially successful on Facebook, which is Italy’s most popular platform, with 34 million active users per month. On Facebook, he currently has 4.5 million followers. The social network where he is most active and from where he posts more frequently every day, however, is Twitter, where 1.2 million people follow his profile @matteosalvinimi. The difference in the number of followers from Facebook is probably due to the fact that the micro-blogging site is apparently less popular among all the demographics of the Italian population. Finally, on Instagram, he has 2.1 million followers.

For the selection of the platform(s) from which to gather the data, the choice has been based on the level of popularity of the leaders’ profile on each of them (based on the number of followers), and their daily presence, regardless of the engagement, or the number of ‘likes’ of each post. In the case of Trump, it must be pointed out that, contrary to expectations, not a significant number of multimodal posts relevant for our analysis has been shared on Twitter in the period of stake. Therefore, most of the data in his case are from Instagram. As a primarily image-based social media platform, Instagram is quickly growing in popularity especially among young people, with its current one billion world users (Statista 2020), and continues the shift in communication towards online multimodal discourse (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

As for Salvini, most multimodal data have been gathered from his Facebook page, and partly from Twitter, excluding retweets. In the case of the *League* leader, multimodal posts are in any case often shared on all his profiles on the same day, or simultaneously. Therefore, many redundant posts have been detected and discarded.

As a disclaimer to our analysis, it must be pointed out that many, if not all of the images or videos (aside from Salvini’s Facebook live videos) posted on the leaders’ social media platforms, are undoubtedly the result of specific social media teams working behind the scenes, and not the product of the direct action of the politicians. However, as they have been shared on their pages, the politicians are supposed to endorse both the views expressed in the tweets or posts, as well as the ideologies associated with each image or video.

The selection of the period under analysis is significant. In Autumn 2018, after a successful mid-term election, Trump sought to have the appropriation bill for 2019 include a funding measure on border security, to finance the construction of a new wall extending the barrier along the

Mexican border. After the refusal of the Democrats to support the operation, he decided to enact a government shutdown as a form of political coercion over immigration policy. The shutdown between December 2018 and January 2019 lasted 35 days and was the longest in American history. Many of the posts collected date from that specific time frame and were shared on Trump's social media profiles to give impulse to his propaganda.

As for Salvini, the years 2018-2019 marked his rising success as *League* secretary, senator, Deputy-Prime Minister, and Interior Minister.⁴ Moreover, following his relentless campaigning both online and offline, in Spring 2019, his party placed first in the election for the European Parliament with 34 percent of the vote.

Immigration in the US and Italy presents some significant differences. In the US, the immigration and anti-immigration debate is centred on the US-Mexico corridor and undocumented immigration from Mexico and Latin America. By contrast, owing to the 'refugee crisis,' a great deal of the immigration debate in Italy has to do with the arrivals by sea from Africa or the Middle-East, increased by widespread fears of Islamic terrorism, following the attacks in Europe in the last few years. The *League* (formerly *Nothern League*), once an ethno-regionalist party aiming at the independence of Northern Italy, the so-called Padania, i.e. the area surrounding the Po Valley, with Salvini as secretary changed its message. The new slogans, "Italy First" and "Italians first!" have skilfully replaced the old secessionist battle cry, and closely resemble Trump's mantra "America first." After this camouflage operation, the party embraced nativism, Euro-scepticism, anti-elitism, and strong anti-immigration rhetoric.

This study is part of a more comprehensive research on anti-immigration rhetoric in right-wing populist discourse in a contrastive perspective and is designed to complement linguistic findings with the multimodal rhetorical strategies adopted. Linguistic data from both speeches and social network posts suggest that immigrants and immigration in right-wing populist discourse are framed as a threat (Lorenzetti, forthcoming). In the rhetorical narrative enacted by both Trump and Salvini, the framing of immigration as a threat articulates around three macro-themes, namely national security, national economy, and cultural incompatibility. Immigrants are framed as a vehicle for the spread of Islamic terrorism, or merely as criminals. In terms of the threat to the economy, they are viewed as fake immigrants, accused of stealing jobs from nationals and of causing the country's economic collapse. Finally, they are seen as threatening an alleged cohesion and a generic national identity, while integration is depicted as impossible.

⁴ Matteo Salvini was Deputy-Prime Minister and Interior Minister until September 2019, until the end of the so called 'yellow-green' government with the *Five Star Movement*, another anti-establishment party. From that moment on, he has been the leader of the opposition.

This study has a qualitative aim and presents a detailed analysis of 8 multimodal posts from the corpus collected. The analysis is conducted by investigating how social actors, and the related phenomenon of immigration, are visually represented and recontextualised on the profile pages of the two right-wing populists, drawing on Van Leeuwen's (2008) model. The ways multimodal resources are deployed in meaning-construction will enable us to unveil the underlying ideological stances. The selection of the images and videos analysed is representative of the main patterns of recontextualisation enacted.

5. The representation of immigrants on Donald Trump's and Matteo Salvini's social media profiles: a multimodal analysis

Human culture is widely based on visual perception, which since ancient times has been considered as a reliable source of knowledge. Images, however, do not just serve as faithful depictions of reality, but to instruct and prescribe norms and behaviours as well (Lilleker, Veneti and Jackson 2020), capturing the attention of the public and crystallising sentiments. Despite their alleged authenticity, photographs are far from being reliable sources of knowledge (Bleiker 2018). They reflect aesthetic choices, but also represent the world from a particular angle (Ledin and Machin 2020). Moreover, they may be strategically constructed to convey a specific impression while deliberately concealing something else from view. Whilst words provide facts and explanations, images are capable of stirring strong emotions and conveying ideologically loaded perspectives by connotation (Van Leeuwen 2008). This amounts to saying that verbal messages carry with them an aura of performativity (Austin 1962) that cannot be subsequently denied. By contrast, images need the interpretation of a viewer, and the power of those representations rests precisely on the fact that their ideological meanings can be easily denied or mitigated as 'mere entertainment,' and not ascribable to the original intention of the producer. Consequently, visual racism, though pervasive and powerful as it may be, can be more easily dismissed as happening only "in the eye of the beholder" (Van Leeuwen 2000, 35).

The representation of immigrants and immigration on Trump's social media pages is subservient to his essentialist and nationalist ideological stance (Heuman and González 2018). In Figure 1, the picture is accompanied by a big slogan in white. The language in it is simple and straightforward with the action verb *build* and the verb of inherently directed motion *fall* (Levin 1993) standing in a reversive relationship (Cruse 2000). Significantly, not only do the two verbs convey a figurative reversal in motion, but *fall* is also an unaccusative verb,⁵ which

⁵ Unaccusative verbs are intransitive verbs whose grammatical subject is not a semantic agent (see Perlmutter 1978; Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005).

leads us to interpret the fall of crime as a direct consequence of the agitative action produced by building the wall. The slogan is presented with a rhyme, suggesting that the construction of the wall is an easy and effective solution to fight crime.

In the picture, whatever is beyond the national border, physically represented by the wall, is otherness. What is more, it is associated with crime and evil doing, thus enacting a stereotyped generalisation of Mexico and its citizens as crime bearers, together with an oversimplification of both the issues of immigration and crime fight. Trump is portrayed in a long shot while interacting with a border patrol agent in uniform, gesticulating and apparently complimenting him for the excellent job done. Even from a distance, the two men can be identified as individuals with a clear professional role. Aside from Trump, who can be easily recognised, one of the identity attributes is the border patrol officer's uniform (Ledin and Machin 2020). The two subjects are also portrayed from below, and as viewers, we look up to them for their symbolic power and authority as guardians of the nation. On the background, a prototype of a border barrier is visible. Although the height of the two men is emphasised, and their image has probably been vertically stretched, the picture highlights the difference in size between the two men and the wall. The wall, therefore, epitomises insurmountability.

The upper side of the picture is entirely taken by the barrier with the symbolic implication that crime, also evoked by the black blurred part on the left side, is going to fall due to its presence, thus leaving criminals behind it. The right part of the composition, with the wall and the two main characters, visually represents something New, as the change that is going to be enacted in society for the well-being of all the American people. The black blurred element on the left, on the contrary, symbolises the Given, the agreed-upon point of departure for the message (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006), namely that what stands behind the wall is inherently associated with evildoing. The 'positive' *versus* 'negative' contrast is also conveyed by the light/darkness opposition in the image. Vivid colours appear in the right part, while the left part is entirely black, which, as a colour, is often associated with negative feelings or actions (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002), but in this case, may also convey the idea that what is behind the wall is concealed from view as not worthy of appearing in the picture.

In this image, immigrants are not represented. They are just evoked. However, the presence of such a big barrier and the slogan convey the impression that crime in the country is entirely imported from abroad. Mexicans are connoted as criminals, even though they are excluded from the representation, and the wall symbolises a clear separation between those legitimately in from those who are illegitimate and do not belong here, a *limen* separating law from the absence

of it (Dechaine 2009). At the same time, the image has an agenda updating function, but also a self-promotional one.



Fig. 1: Trump – Instagram post 24/01/2019⁶

In the next two images immigration is the pretext for Trump to enact the strategy of self-promotion, presenting himself as the commander in chief who is going to protect the country from any external evil force, thus once again highlighting an ‘us’ *versus* ‘them’ dichotomy in a nationalist and nativist sense.

In both images, immigrants are only evoked but not represented. They are construed as a threat to the security of the nation. In Figure 2, Trump is portrayed in a dynamic pose and with his finger pointing at the audience. This gesture, which is usually seen as rude and aggressive when it is directed at someone, here may function as an illustrator (Ekman and Friesen 1969) in an attempt to connect with the audience and show interest (Jones 2017). The image, showing Trump as a sort of Marvel character, highlights his self-promotion as the ‘man of action’ protecting the country, as exemplified by the reference to himself through the possessive *my* in the expression *my duty*, which enables him to highlight his positive qualities and moral stance (Van Dijk 2002). At the same time, the American flag, symbol of national unity, is visible in the background. His stature emerges out of the photo frame, and while his gaze is not directed at the viewers, he appears to look down on them. The colours in the image are also strategically

⁶ Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BtAE3w_F1Wh/. All websites were last visited on 16/04/2020.

selected to connote a sense of national unity, as even the colours of Trump's outfit, shirt, and tie evoke those of the American flag (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002; Ledin and Mair 2020). Furthermore, while the quote reported appears to be a message from the President, the words "defense of our nation" are underlined. This may be seen as a message directed primarily to the American people, foregrounding the 'united people' sense (Canovan 1999). However, as this image was posted online in the period of the government shutdown, it may also represent an indirect message to his political opponents as ratified addressees (Bell 1984). Finally, due to the ubiquity of social media, it may also be an indirect warning for the unwanted and threatening outsiders. In this sense, the pointing gesture may acquire a double function: an acknowledgement gesture in the case of the in-group audience, and a warning gesture for the out-groups.

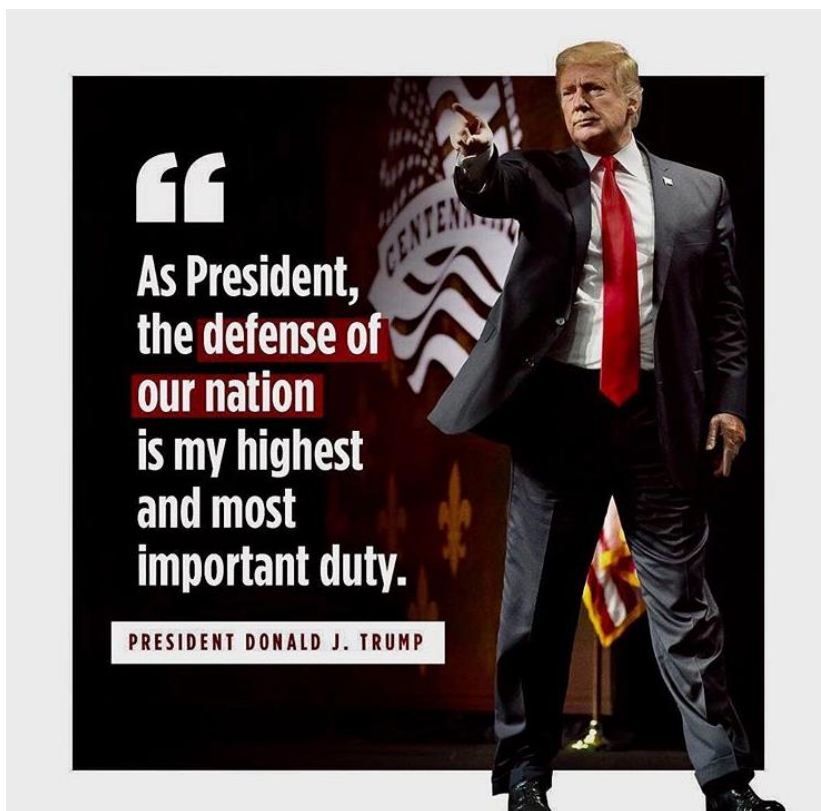


Fig. 2: Trump – Instagram post 20/01/2019⁷

A similar perspective for audience design (Bell 1984) can be observed in Fig. 3. This image displays a strategy that Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019) have termed the "memetization of digital politics." A meme in digital culture is a cultural artefact that "passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon" (Shifman 2013, 364). Memes

⁷ Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs15APHFMDJ/>.

are units of content, such as jokes, rumours, videos, or websites that propagate gradually through interpersonal contacts via the Internet and spread by imitation. Biologist Richard Dawkins originally coined the term in 1976 based on the Greek word *mīmēma*, which means “something imitated,” to describe gene-like infectious units of culture that spread from person to person. With the advent of Web 2.0, the term gained a new life of its own and a considerable shift in perspective. Nowadays memes are products of the so-called “vernacular creativity,” whereby Internet users share their emotions, opinions and (usually humorous) interpretations about the surrounding reality.

Here Trump is portrayed as a giant figure watching over the wall and looking down on us as viewers with a forceful and direct gaze. What is peculiar to this image is its intertextual reference. Both the font and the choice of the slogan remind to the popular HBO TV series *Games of Thrones*, whose main slogan was “Winter is coming.”

In this picture, Trump employs elements of popular culture to speak to a broader audience, as a real marketing strategy designed to gain new followers (and possibly voters). The mixing of elements of popular culture with politics to attract people’s attention and stir their emotions has already been highlighted in the case of populist leaders (Lorenzetti 2016; 2018). However, an image like this one, tackling the issue of border security and designed to enhance Trump’s role as leader and commander in chief, is also highly dissonant. The association of immigration with fiction produces the trivialisation and simplification of such a serious and highly complex phenomenon. At the same time, any reference to human sufferings or people’s motives behind border crossings is neglected.



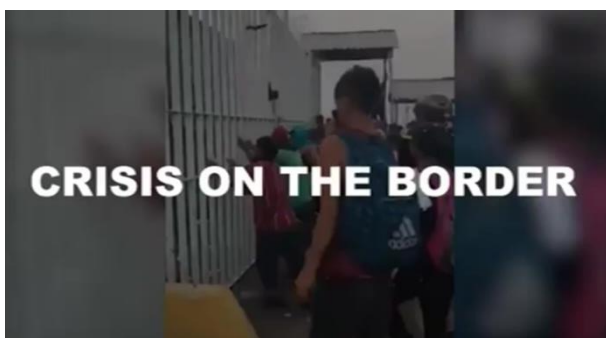
Fig. 3: Trump – Twitter post 03/01/2019⁸

⁸ Source: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1081735898679701505>.

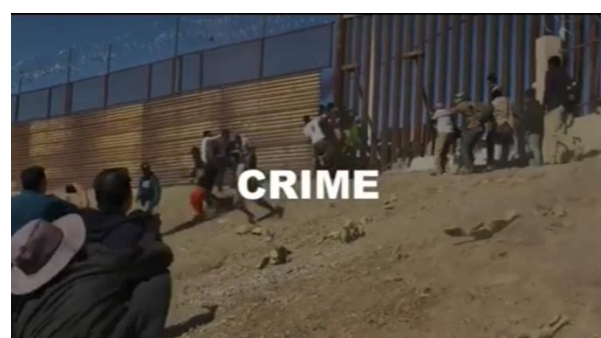
In January 2019, on Trump’s Instagram profile, two related videos were shared named “Crisis on the border.”⁹ They have a comparable length: the first one, that I am going to analyse lasts 23”, while the second one 29”. Moreover, despite the differences in format and soundtrack, their argumentative frame is comparable. Since the first video is constructed in such a way that a label is provided for every image shown, snapshots have been taken to describe its content in detail.

Based on its rhetorical strategy, the video can be subdivided into two main parts, with a *caesura* in the middle. The first part (Fig. 4a-4d) claims to be a sort of photojournalistic *reportage* of border crossings (Ledin and Machin 2020). However, while focusing on a series of illegal acts, it licenses the view that all the people illegally crossing the border are *de facto* criminals. The soundtrack accompanying this part recalls the trailers of war or sci-fi movies, where a war scenario is envisaged. Fig. 4e is the central part of the video, symbolising the American Nation, and music stops when Sen. Schumer expresses the central thesis in it. Finally, the last part (Fig. 4f-4h) is designed to show actions ‘on the right side of the law’ and presents the building of the wall as the solution to the problem. An anthem-like soundtrack highlighting a sense of national unity and shared purpose in defence of the nation can be heard in the background.

In the first image, we see a group of dark-skinned people pushing against a barrier, screaming in Spanish, while urban *guerrilla* images follow. The first label used is “Crisis on the border” (Fig. 4a). In the second scene (Fig. 4b), a multitude of people is portrayed while running and pushing, trying to climb a barrier in what appears like a desertic area. They cannot be distinguished and look like a collective, although some items of clothing (like the hat) can be noticed and have the function of cultural categorisation (Van Leeuwen 2008). The label used here is “Crime,” and the scene conveys an idea of something dangerous happening, in a sort of war-like scenario.



a)



b)

Fig. 4a-Fig. 4b: Crisis on the Border video – first and second frames

⁹ The video is available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BsL63dYlmP_/.

Bags with suspicious content are shown in the next sequence (Fig. 4c) under the inspection of the ICE agents, while the label “Drugs” appears on the screen. The fourth scene (Fig. 4d) shows a massive group of people running, suggesting that they are those undocumented immigrants who have trespassed the barrier. They are seen from above and portrayed in a long shot. Hence, they cannot be distinguished, but look like a homogeneous group. The label adopted here is “Lawlessness” thus conflating together an act of illegal crossing with a host of more serious crimes.



c)



d)

Fig. 4c-Fig. 4d: Crisis on the Border video – third and fourth frames

The next frame (Fig. 4e) shows the argumentative thesis and the core of the video. Senator Chuck Schumer from a 2009 speech utters the sentence “Illegal immigration is wrong, plain and simple.” In this case, the institutional role of the politician whose speech from a different period has been recontextualised *ad hoc* for the stance expressed is used as an authorization strategy to legitimise the construction of the barrier (Van Leeuwen 2008). Following this, in Fig. 4f a huge barrier appears, with Trump’s voice-over slogan “We will build a wall.”



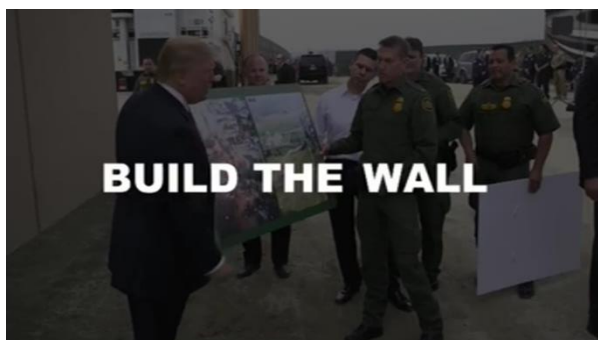
e)



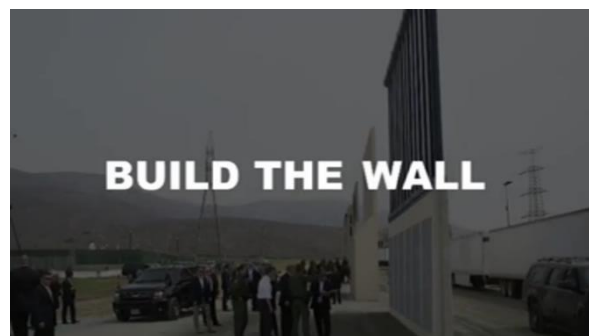
f)

Fig. 4e-Fig. 4f: Crisis on the Border video – sixth and seventh frames

Trump is portrayed while talking with border patrol agents, who are showing him barrier prototypes in Fig. 4g. A crowd's voice in the background can be heard chanting "Build the wall! Build the wall!", while the letters forming the slogan appear on the screen matching the people's voice rhythm. Finally, in Fig. 4h, the barrier is shown from a distance, highlighting the contrast in size with the characters in front of it.



g)



h)

Fig. 4g-Fig. 4h: Crisis on the Border video – eighth and ninth frames

This is one of the few occasions, in which immigrants are represented in Trump's social media multimodal posts. However, they are not only portrayed as homogeneous and 'all the same,' deprived of their individuality, but from the agency point of view, they are associated with criminal actions (Van Leeuwen 2008). They are also linked to an invasion scenario, highlighting the IMMIGRATION IS WAR metaphor (Charteris-Black 2006; Lorenzetti forthcoming). The wall, by contrast, becomes a synecdoche for the country's strength, suggesting a clear separation between US greatness and Latin America weakness (Heuman and González 2018).

The second video that for space reasons cannot be analysed in detail displays a similar strategy. It draws on figures about crime, drug, and death rates by murder or drug in the US, that are projected in red and white over a blue background, evoking the American flag colours, and works on the emotional impact of infographics to persuade the viewer that building the wall is the right solution to stop the proliferation of imported-from-abroad crime in the country.

On Salvini's social media platforms, as part of his harsh anti-immigration rhetoric, strong emphasis is conferred to the arrivals of people by sea from Northern Africa or the Middle-East. The image in Fig. 5 refers to the many controversies in which Salvini was involved in 2019 as Interior Minister after refusing permission for rescue ships to dock. Although the elongated silhouette of the Aquarius ship seems to emerge from the sea and the picture is shot from below, there is a clear horizontal separation between the upper part of the image, including the ship

and the people on it, and the lower part with the sea. Asylum seekers are portrayed from below. However, due to the distance, they cannot be easily distinguished and form a homogeneous group. Moreover, cultural categorisation can be observed as many wear headscarves, which connote them as Muslims (Van Leeuwen 2008).

The text in the lower part of the post includes the expression *human traffickers* and highlights the presupposition that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are conspiring with human traffickers as their accomplices. The foregrounding of the human trafficking scenario allows Salvini to divert the attention and mitigate his harsh anti-immigration stance by associating it with a humanitarian purpose, *de facto* implicating that he is ‘pro-migrants’ and values all human lives. The hashtag *#closedports* (*#portichiusi*), one of the mantras of the former Interior Minister, is accompanied by a new one, *#openhearts* (*#cuoriaperti*), in an attempt to show that despite not allowing people to disembark, he does not hate them as individuals. The language used is simple and straightforward, with clear oppositions (*open/closed*) and nominalisations. Salvini is presented as the strong action leader with the symbolic warning “If you are human traffickers, you will stay out of our ports.”



Fig. 5: Salvini – Facebook post 13/10/2018¹⁰

Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 are also emblematic of Salvini’s visual anti-immigration rhetoric. Fig. 6 shows scrapers at work in the various phases of the destruction of a refugee camp. Scrapers are pervasive images in Salvini’s rhetoric, regularly presented with the hashtag *#ruspa* to convey the idea of the physical destruction of something that is alien and should not belong here. A group of people viewed from afar is helplessly witnessing the destruction of the camp. The vivid

¹⁰ Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.10151670912208155/10155987174323155/?type=3&theater>.

blue sky in all the four images contrasts with the dark skin of the asylum seekers, but also with the uniform of the policemen and with the camouflage colour of the scrapers, while light emerges again in the fourth picture (bottom-right) when the destruction of the camp has been completed. The slogan is accompanied by the tick emoji symbol ✓ to indicate an accomplishment, suggesting the interpretation of a leader who effectively solves problems as opposed to merely promising to do so (like his “do-gooders” opposers do). Immigrants, therefore, are construed as problems. Their individuality and their problems as human beings are denied, and they are reified as a task to solve in a to-do list.

The physical destruction of the camp configures itself as an anthropoemic strategy, whereby everything that does not conform to the standards of the dominant culture needs to be removed (Lévi-Strauss 1955; Bauman 2012). Removing these people from sight, in this line of thought, also removes them from our moral obligation towards them, as if they were not here at all, regardless of their humanitarian problem.

This post allows the leader to self-promote himself as a ‘man of action’ who solves problems, cares for his citizens, as opposed to his predecessors (Van Dijk 2002).



**SGOMBERO BARACCOPOLI
SAN FERDINANDO (RC)** 
**DALLE PAROLE
AI FATTI!**  **6 MARZO 2019**

Fig. 6: Salvini – Facebook post 06/03/2019¹¹

¹¹ Source: <https://www.facebook.com/252306033154/posts/dopo-cona-e-bagnoli-in-veneto-castelnuovo-di-porto-nel-lazio-dopo-il-blitz-a-bor/10156455735813155/>.

Fig. 7 presents an image taken from a right-wing journalistic talk show, where a dark-skinned man is shown as an individual, but specifying that he has illegally entered the country and he is a murderer. This leads to the metonymic generalisation that all immigrants are criminals and must be repatriated as they bring war to the country (IMMIGRATION IS WAR mapping). Significantly, the verb used to indicate ‘repatriate’ is *rispedire* (*re-send*). Since the verb *spedire* in Italian is primarily used about mail or packages, people here are treated as commodities that can be sent back to where they belong. In a coarse language, the leader dismisses humanitarian action as pointless, while he repeats one of his favourite slogans “zero tolerance,” highlighting his stance as a forceful leader.

On his page, it is only when an immigrant is construed as an evildoer, associated with some crime, that he is represented as an individual.



Fig. 7: Salvini – Twitter post 26/05/2019¹²

Finally, in Fig. 8, the self-promotion of the leader who offers practical and straightforward solutions to the country’s problems is mixed with the advertising of his private *persona*. Salvini is portrayed as smiling while taking a selfie, a common gesture like ‘the average man.’

¹² Source: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1132597385341939712>.



Fig. 8: Salvini – Facebook post 18/02/2019¹³

The focus here is on a man represented as ‘one of the people,’ but with a self-reference on his mobile phone cover, which is not something the average person could afford. He is portrayed in front of the sea at sunset, and in the blurred background, there is something that might be a little island or even a boat with migrants approaching. The message serves as a self-justification related to the controversies already discussed in Fig. 5, namely “while the judiciary (another elite power) accuses me, the people know that I am acting on their behalf.” In this picture, the immigration issue is evoked and not represented, while highlighting Salvini’s role as a full leader, who can be at the same time a commander in chief and ‘one of the people,’ while the Italian flag serves to convey an additional sense of pride and national unity.

6. Conclusions

Despite the substantial differences in the immigration-related contextual situation in Italy and the US, the analysis of the multimodal representation of immigrants and, indirectly, of the phenomenon of immigration, on the social media profiles of the two right-wing populist leaders has revealed comparable strategies. Through the coherent joint coordination of different semiotic resources, immigrants, either from Mexico or Latin America in the case of Trump or from Africa and the Middle-East in the case of Salvini, are systematically framed as alien and deviant (Dechaine 2009; Hogan and Haltinner 2015; Heuman and González 2018). Recontextualisation is particularly effective by generalisation, exclusion from the

¹³ Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.278194028154/10156420639618155/?type=3&theater>.

representation, and negative evaluation by stereotyping (Van Leeuwen 2008), which conveys a one-sided misrepresentation of ethnic groups (Chilton 2004), thus enacting covert racism.

The othering of immigrants occurs through visual homogenisation, with the denial of people's individuality, their portrayal as agents of criminal actions, negative cultural connotation, or the exclusion from representation. By contrast, the only occasion when they are shown as single human beings is as emblematic cases of criminals, instrumental in illustrating the leaders' ethno-nationalist ideological stance and stereotyped generalisations.

This dehumanising strategy paves the way for their exclusion from the category of legitimate human beings, and the shifting of immigration from humanitarian issue to security threat. The visual rhetoric enacted by the two leaders with the symbols of the wall and of closed ports suggests an anthropoemic view of society (Lévi-Strauss 1955), where the ejection of the deviants, who do not conform to the rules of the dominant group, is the only possible strategy to preserve the alleged unity and purity of the nation.

Social media affordances allow the two leaders to exploit their visual anti-immigration rhetoric to "build their people," while at the same time strengthening their self-presentation as influential leaders. The building of a political community, that due to the volatile and unstable nature of digital collectives (Han 2017) results in never-ending propaganda, for right-wing populist leaders can only happen by the creation of an out-group, and immigrants are the perfect scapegoats, especially if entering the country illegally. Both leaders in their posts rely on a simple and informal slogan-like language (Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy and Roberts 2016) permeated with words (*wall, ports, crime, invasion*) that emblematically summarise their ideological stance. Their common sense rhetoric with messages that are at the same time simple and flexible enough to be easily tailored to one's own ideology (Engesser et al. 2017) allows them to mitigate accusations of racism by focusing on an alleged humanitarian interest (Van Dijk 2002). Trump emerges as the commander in chief of the nation, who is going to save the country from a crime invasion. Salvini, however, also carefully advertises his private *persona*, presenting himself as "one of the people," with selfie posts and mitigating strategies (*#openhearts*, or "Italians know I acted on their behalf"). Emotional appeals and simplification of such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon as immigration is also enacted through the juxtaposition of popular fictional images with the so-called "memetization of politics" (and of political contents) (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019), or the usage of emojis. Oversimplifying the phenomenon, producing trivialised and decontextualised misrepresentations are instrumental in enacting racist exclusion. Presenting migrants as a fraud, as criminals who must be kept beyond a wall, and as undesirables that must be controlled, evacuated, and excluded produces what Bauman

(2016) termed adiaphorization, i.e. considering migrants as outside of one's moral interests, causing *de facto* the legitimisation of a social production of immorality.

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