



“Whoever decides for you without you, s/he is against you!”: immigrant activism and the role of the Left in political racialization

Teresa M. Cappiali

To cite this article: Teresa M. Cappiali (2016): “Whoever decides for you without you, s/he is against you!”: immigrant activism and the role of the Left in political racialization, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2016.1229487](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1229487)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1229487>



Published online: 21 Sep 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

“Whoever decides for you without you, s/he is against you!”: immigrant activism and the role of the Left in political racialization

Teresa M. Cappiali

Collegio Carlo Alberto, Turin, Italy

ABSTRACT

Much of the migration literature neglects the questions of why and how “native” allies *obstruct* activism by immigrants and ethnic minorities. Left-wing organizations in particular are often assumed to be supportive of inclusion, and little research exists on the ways they have prevented the migrant population from having a voice in the political arena and from taking part in society as equals. Drawing on the critical theory literature, I introduce the concept of *political racialization*. This concept refers to mechanisms whereby political actors, in order to legitimize their work on immigration, have partially included immigrants in the political sphere, but in a relationship of “ethnic” or “racial” subordination. Through the analysis of 57 in-depth interviews with immigrant activists, I show how political racialization works within the Italian Left and how it contributes to marginalize the migrant population. I further explain how immigrant activists have challenged political racialization through their activism.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 31 August 2015; Accepted 10 May 2016

KEYWORDS Immigrant activism; left actors; immigrant allies; politics of exclusion; immigrants’ racialization; Italy

Much of the literature on the mobilization of immigrants and ethnic minorities tends to assume a positive role of “native” allies in supporting the migrant population’s struggle for recognition (see for instance Voss and Bloemraad 2011). Very rarely, however, does the literature examine why and how these allies *obstruct* the mobilization of this migrant population.¹ This is particularly true for left-wing organizations, which are “often un-problematically assumed to be supportive and even representative of immigrants” (Però 2005, 833). This lacuna is regrettable because it has prevented scholars from assessing the implications of the responsibilities of the Left in marginalizing and discriminating against immigrants and ethnic minorities in Western democracies.

In Italy, a few authors have examined the interaction between native organizations and immigrant activists from a critical perspective (see for

CONTACT Teresa M. Cappiali  teresa.cappiali@carloalberto.org

© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

instance Però 2005, 2007; Pojmann 2006; Cappiali 2015, 2016).² In particular, Davide Però (2005, 2007), in his study of the left-wing city of Bologna, suggests the presence of powerful internal contradictions within the Italian Left, and a strong ideological discrepancy between inclusive rhetoric and exclusive practices. He identifies mechanisms by which the “Otherness” of immigrants is produced, including paternalism, inferiorization, and essentialization of immigrants’ culture and difference. Additionally, in my previous work, I have shown that left-wing organizations have contributed to obstructing immigrant claims, often using immigrants’ struggles opportunistically to gain visibility and power in the political arena (Cappiali 2016). An important contribution in a similar direction can also be found in the feminist literature. In her book, *Immigrant Women and Feminism in Italy*, Pojmann (2006) presents an in-depth examination of the interaction between the historic feminism of Italy and the activism of migrant women living in that country. The author points out that Italian feminists tend to work on behalf of, instead of with, migrant women. She highlights, moreover, the many attempts by migrant women to advance the cause of democratic pluralism, as evidenced, for instance, by the creation of multi-ethnic migrant groups (Pojmann 2006, 133).

Building on the pioneering research presented above, this article examines the responsibilities of the Left in the political exclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities in Italy. I address the following questions: How do left-wing organizations contribute to exclude and marginalize immigrant activists in the political sphere? What are the implications for inclusion in receiving societies? How do immigrant activists challenge their allies? I base my analysis on first-hand data collected during fieldwork between 2013 and 2014 (see below).

My interest in investigating the persistence of mechanisms of exclusion by the Italian Left was piqued during an interview I conducted in Italy in 2013. The interview was with a key immigrant activist of the radical left who had been active for more than twelve years, since his arrival in the country at the beginning of the 1990s. This interviewee said to me:

For many years, left-wing organizations from the whole political spectrum have prevented *us* [*the immigrants*] from having a say in the decisions taken on our behalf. As Gandhi said: “S/he who decides for you without you is against you!” You want to support immigrants’ struggles for recognition? We have to construct the political itinerary together, because if we do not, we construct itineraries that represent a true regression with respect to immigrants’ political participation and self-determination. (Radical left activists, Turin, emphasis in original)

Over the years, Gandhi’s expression has been widely used among immigrant activists in Italy to criticize the tendency of their left-wing allies to talk *on their behalf* and prevent their self-determination, thereby creating obstacles to their ability to develop their own claims and strategies for greater

recognition.³ These criticisms contrast with the rhetoric promoted by the Italian Left, which depicts immigrants as legitimate political subjects (see for instance Cobbe and Grappi 2011). It also conflicts with several attempts by the Left to create channels for encouraging immigrants' participation (see Caponio 2005, Però 2005, 2007, Cappiali 2015).

I draw my analytical approach from the critical theory literature and introduce the concept of *political racialization*. This concept refers to a process whereby left-wing actors, in order to legitimize their work on immigration, have partially included immigrants in the political sphere (by creating, for instance, channels of participation and promoting their representation, see Cappiali 2015), but in a relationship of "ethnic" or "racial" subordination. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews with immigrant activists, I show how political racialization works within left-wing organizations. I also point out that by systematically preventing immigrant activists from taking the floor and determining their own trajectories within their organizations, they have contributed to producing and reinforcing their marginalization in the receiving society. I further examine how, despite marginalization, immigrant activists have challenged political racialization through their activism.

I begin with a presentation of my theoretical approach and my methodology. I proceed with a discussion of the difficult alliances between immigrant activists and the Italian Left. I then carry on the analysis of a number of interviews that I conducted with immigrant activists. I conclude by presenting a summary of my findings. I also suggest some new avenues for further research.

A critical theory approach

This study applies a critical theory approach to key concepts of *inclusion* and *exclusion*. These two concepts are central in the migration literature because they define those processes by which immigrants and ethnic minorities have, or are prevented from having, access to material, political, and cultural resources. These resources are crucial because they allow immigrant and ethnic minorities to interact on an equal footing with other actors in the receiving society (Bloemraad 2006). Alternatively, some authors have explained how specific practices in receiving societies, such as restrictive immigration laws and citizenship regimes, serve not to exclude the migration population, but rather to include them within specific relations of subordination that result in "differential" or "subordinated inclusion" of the migrant population vis-à-vis the labour market (Mezzadra and Neilson 2010; see also Anderson 2010).

In ethnic and racial studies, the critical theory approach is a useful paradigm to investigate dynamics of inclusion and exclusion because it helps us

shed light on how specific relations and hierarchies of power, supported by institutional and discursive devices, shape the position of actors in society and their interactions. In particular, scholars show how discourses and practices by specific actors in the receiving society – including, for instance, the state, institutional actors and the media (El-Tayeb 2011), specific immigration and labour laws (Anderson 2010), bureaucratic services (Marchetti and Scrinzi 2014), and employers (Maldonato 2009) – rather than completing excluding, produce instead complicated process of subordinated inclusion. Building on this literature, I investigate one aspect widely overlooked in the study of Western democracies: how and why left-wing political actors *themselves* have contributed to the racialization of immigrant activists. The migration literature has shown the importance of the concept of inclusion and exclusion to explain immigrants' political incorporation (Hochschild et al. 2013). Yet, scholars have failed to apply the critical theory approach to the study of immigrants' interaction with their allies. In order to overcome this major lacuna, I introduce in this article the concept of *political racialization* to examine the mechanisms of "differential inclusion", specifically in the political sphere. Political racialization calls attention to mechanisms whereby political actors have partially included immigrants in the political sphere, but in a relationship of "ethnic" or "racial" subordination.⁴

Through this concept, I am able to show how left-wing organizations contribute to the "othering" of the migrant population, by reinforcing the binary narrative that distinguishes between "us" and "them", or native-born Italians and the migrant population. This relation of power is "differential" insofar as the Left deploys complex mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that result in the subaltern integration of the migrant activists in their organizations. I refer to these mechanisms as processes of "othering" because, through structural and discursive devices, they construct immigrants and ethnic minorities as inferior "Others". This is done on the basis of their perceived difference or the presumed backwardness of the migrant population relative to the "native" Italians (Però 2007). At the same time, these mechanisms produce processes of "racialization" (or "ethnicization") because they are based on ascribed characteristics of ethnic, race, and religious affiliations, and usually involve a "native" or "white" European population addressing a "non-native" and "non-white" group of people (El-Tayeb 2011; Aly 2016). "Racialization" towards immigrants and ethnic minorities are reflected in different forms of racism and discrimination as well as in Islamophobic practices and the criminalization of the migrant population and their descendants (El-Tayeb 2011; Aly 2016). They further result in differential paths of economic and social inclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities in receiving societies. These paths often result in concentration of specific "ethnic" or "racial" groups in marginal or unequal social and economic positions (Chaudhary 2015).

Methodology

My research draws from extensive fieldwork conducted in Italy between 2013 and 2014. It is based on a selection of data collected during fourteen months of research, including archival material (e.g. newspapers, official, and unofficial documents of the left-wing organizations), participant observation of key events (e.g. national and local meetings with the main left-wing organizations) and 111 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, of which 57 were with immigrant activists. The research was conducted mainly in four middle-sized cities in Northern Italy – Bologna, Reggio Emilia, Brescia, and Bergamo – but some interviews were also conducted in Milan, Turin and Rome, where I met some key migrant activists known at the national level. I triangulated the interviews with participant observation and use of material shared by the activists in order to better assess the role of immigrant activists in left-wing organizations. I supported my analysis with field notes from informal conversations I had with activists during meetings and events. All selected material was analysed and coded with the help of Nvivo software.

For this study, I have selected relevant material to analyse the relationship between immigrant activists and the Left, and I have relied mostly on the fifty-seven interviews with immigrant activists. These interviews were mainly with third-country nationals or new Italian citizens originally from non-EU countries (see [Table 1](#)). Most of these activists were members of left-wing organizations or had collaborated with them in a way or another. Most interviewees were councillors or members of the executive of local administrations, delegates or functionaries of traditional trade unions, and militants of social movements and grassroots unions. I also interviewed cultural mediators and members of some key immigrant associations with a political orientation, as they focused on influencing the public sphere at the local or national level. Out of fifty-seven interviewees, fifteen were women. Most women I interviewed had not held roles of responsibility within the organizations examined in my study, or were relatively marginal activists, which explains their underrepresentation in my sample. The same reasoning holds for the selection of some nationalities over others. Among the immigrant activists, eight interviewees were second-generation migrants.

Table 1. Immigrant interviewees.

Country of origin	Most numerous groups: Morocco (14); Senegal (14); Pakistan (6) Two interviewees per country of origin: Moldavia; Egypt; Cameroon; Ghana One interviewee per country of origin: Albania; Algeria; Bangladesh; Bolivia; China; India; Nigeria; Peru; Philippines; Romania; Somali; Togo; Tunisia; Ukraine, Cote d'Ivoire
Cities	Milan (2), Turin (1), Rome (1) Reggio Emilia (13); Bologna (19); Brescia (14); Bergamo (7)
Immigration status	EU citizen (1); Italian citizen (15); Permanent resident (17); Temporary working permit (14); Student permit (4) Undocumented (6)

I gave particular attention to key left-wing organizations that have mobilized around the issue of immigration in relevant ways and that have done so since the first arrival of immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s (Kosic and Triandafyllidou 2005, 26). A particular focus was given to the main left-wing party, the *Partito Democratico* – the Democratic Party – and the main traditional left-wing trade union, the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL) – the Italian General Confederation of Labor.⁵ However, I also looked into several anti-racist organizations belonging to different political orientations within the radical left, including groups belonging to social centres (for an articulated definition of the radical left see Cosseron 2007). I followed some activities of grassroots trade unions (e.g. USB and Cobas) – organizations that have been able to grow during the financial crisis that started in 2008, and that have been mobilizing vulnerable immigrants around issues of housing and better working conditions (see Cappiali 2015).⁶

Complicated alliances

The migration literature assumes that traditional ideological positions of equality and solidarity make left-wing organizations the “natural” allies of the immigrant population (Però 2005). This assumption is supported by empirical evidence that shows a long-lasting alliance with left-wing actors and consistent left-leaning affiliations of the migrant population, even among those migrants that have more conservative values (see Garbaye 2005; Cappiali 2015). Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust (2011, 100) argue that, in Western Democracies, in the face of increasingly hostile national environments, immigrant and ethnic groups have developed into a “migrant interest group”, which pushes them to vote for or support left-wing parties, which are usually less hostile towards immigrants and ethnic minorities than parties on the right. The increasingly hostile national context and the ongoing financial crisis have strengthened this idea that left-wing groups and migrant workers are natural allies (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust 2011). As in many Western democracies, Italian left-wing organizations have offered immigrants opportunities for political participation, through the opening of various channels, including platforms for discussion on issues of immigration and support for mobilizations (Cappiali 2015). What is more, as a result of restrictive legislation and the vulnerable economic conditions of many immigrants, over the years, the Left has mobilized together with immigrant activists to promote the improvement of immigrant working and living conditions (Cappiali 2015, 2016; Oliveri 2015).⁷

Regardless of these efforts, the Left has also been vigorously criticized for failing to fully support the inclusion and participation of immigrants and migrant workers. Traditional left-wing political actors, such political parties and trade unions, have been criticized for failing to convey the claims of

the most vulnerable in society, and have been challenged for their inability to offer feasible responses to the needs of vulnerable migrant workers (Mottura, Cozzi, and Rinaldini 2010). This has led to a vacuum, which the more radical left-wing groups have increasingly sought to fill (Cappiali 2015, 2016). In particular, the radical left organizations and grassroots trade unions (such as the USB and Cobas) have mobilized on issues of material justice, and have become especially active in those spheres in which other left-wing actors have been absent, such as housing rights, the rights of refugees, and the working rights of undocumented immigrants (Cappiali 2015; Oliveri 2015). Nonetheless, relationships between immigrant activists and radical left organizations can be very complicated, and problems that have already been raised with more moderate political actors are often reproduced in these relationships (see analysis below).

Many immigrant activists have critiqued both traditional and radical left-wing groups for their paternalistic attitudes and, in particular, their tendency to speak on behalf of immigrants, rather than supporting the self-organization and self-determination of immigrant communities (see Pojmann 2006; Mottura, Cozzi, and Rinaldini 2010; Oliveri 2012; Cappiali 2015). In order to confront these paternalistic attitudes, immigrant activists have, over the years, mobilized and in some cases created autonomous organizations (Pojmann 2006; Mantovan 2007). For instance, in 2001, a group of immigrant activists created a national organization, the Immigrant Committee of Italy (*Comitato Immigrati d'Italia*), in opposition to the Table of Migrants of the Social Forum created by the radical left.⁸ Another important national event was “A Day Without Us: The Strike of Migrants” in 2010, in which among other things, immigrant workers in Italy challenged the paternalistic approach of the main left-wing trade union, the CGIL, and groups of anti-racist organizations, mainly of the radical left, which were criticized again for doing things on behalf of immigrants (Oliveri 2015).

Data analysis and findings

Distrust of the Left

Analysis of my fifty-seven interviews with immigrant activists shows a growing, almost irreconcilable, lack of confidence in the traditional allies, such as the Democratic Party and the CGIL. Activists explained that when the Democratic Party was in power, it did not do much to advance immigrants' rights. In particular, it failed to change the current restrictive legislation on immigration, something it had promise for many years. Significant criticisms were also made of the CGIL, which in recent years had failed to protect vulnerable immigrant workers. Therefore, my fieldwork in Italy confirmed the hypothesis suggested by Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust (2011, 100),

according to which the persisting left-leaning affiliation of immigrant and ethnic groups over the years should be read as a “migrant interest group” rather than an authentic political partnership. Most migrant activists in Italy support the Left as the more likely allies in what are increasingly anti-immigrant political environments. Nonetheless, very few seem to trust the Left in issues that concern immigrants specifically and Italian society in general.

Another reason for the existence of alliances between immigrant activists and the Italian Left were the opportunities for participation opened up by left-wing organizations.⁹ The platforms created by the Left to encourage participation in most cases lack influence and actual power in the political arena (Cappiali 2015). Nonetheless, they represent some avenues for participation and opportunities to interact with political institutions. Some of these channels are consultative bodies, others are parallel channels for participation at the city level, or specific platforms for immigrants to participate in left-wing organizations. Even though many of my interviewees criticized these channels, they also viewed them as opportunities for building personal and political skills for their own individual trajectories of participation, and for pushing for some positive change for migrant communities in Italy. Because of these indirect personal and collective benefits, immigrant activists would take part in these platforms. Yet, their criticism was pervasive and most of my interviewees critiqued these efforts as being only minimally effective. In most cases, these channels represented a façade rather than an opportunity for immigrants to discuss, on an equal ground, matters that concerned them. As one of my interviewees expressed: “There is no *real* platform where we can compete in the political arena as equals and make our own legitimate claims as individuals and as collective political forces. They always talk *about us*, but never truly *with us*!” (RL, Brescia). One example, brought in on several occasions, was the tendency of left-wing trade unions and political parties to bring immigrants to their events and demonstrations, without proposing any concrete initiatives to improve their conditions. One of my interviewees told me: “I have found many platforms, many political parties and trade unions. I have understood that the Left only wants to *use immigrants*” (RL, Bologna).

The lack of trust shown towards mainstream left-wing organizations explained why many immigrant activists allied with the radical left. However, alliances with the radical left were also complicated. I asked immigrant activists about the role of radical left organizations in inclusion and whether they considered them as an alternative to traditional left-wing organizations. The radical left was also an object of severe criticism. The analysis of the interviews showed mixed perceptions about these organizations. Immigrant activists in these radical left organizations said that while mainstream left-wing organizations had failed to promote inclusion and neglected to address some key issues that concerned them, the radical left was more

inclined to support their struggles for greater recognition. Some immigrant activists in more vulnerable conditions, such as undocumented immigrants of recent arrival, stated that radical left organizations let them “take the floor” and allowed them to bring forth their claims. Other immigrant activists in the radical left with a longer stay acknowledged the ability of radical left actors to advocate for, and mobilize, immigrants in vulnerable conditions. The financial crisis was believed to encourage these alliances, and they argued that it was better to have these organizations than to be faced with a complete empty space. Nonetheless, these interviewees also explained that, even though they shared the struggles supported by the radical left, they also believed that these organizations were “using immigrants like anybody else”, and in many ways they were not as different from other left-wing organizations as they claimed to be. They felt that radical left organizations had their own agenda and were not willing to challenge their own political views to include those of immigrants. In doing so, they showed resistance to the idea of opening up to pluralism and change.

Many immigrant activists who did not ally with the radical left organizations believed that these organizations were not able to promote *real* inclusion or offer viable political solutions. Their focus was on a limited number of issues, rather than on the multiplicity of problems associated with integration. These organizations addressed issues such as undocumented immigrants’ rights and exploitation. They also concentrated on housing and bureaucracy. However, they neglected major issues linked to cultural integration, while also ignoring challenges faced by the more stable migrant population, including racism, religious accommodation, etc. As one of my interviewees noted:

The radical Left prioritizes conflicts with authorities rather than integration. [...] We need to build a basis of cohabitation beyond ideological conflict. Integration concerns neighborhoods, work, schools, and social life. The radical left is blind to most of these issues. (DP, Brescia)

Some interviewees pushed their criticism further. They believed that the radical left had its own agenda and used immigrants for ideological purposes, like any other left-wing organization. In terms of participation they expressed many concerns. Above all, they criticized the radical left for exposing vulnerable immigrants to police violence. In the words of one activist:

The radical left does not know how to identify with immigrants. If someone goes to their demonstration, he/she risks being deported. [...] They have a political agenda that silences vulnerable immigrants’ voice and needs. (Cultural mediator, Bologna)

Overall, immigrant activists from all political spectrums made a straightforward criticism of all left-wing organizations, which present themselves as friendly and

willing to support immigrants' struggles, but de facto opposes immigrants' successful trajectory in the political sphere and in the receiving society at large.

Resistance to granting local voting rights

One point that was often raised during my interviews was that the Left prevented immigrants from having a say on matters that affected them, and used them as an *object of their discourse*. Immigrant activists shared the belief that, despite its rhetoric about immigrants' participation and self-determination, the Left used an inclusive discourse to gain legitimacy in the political arena, rather than encouraging a true participation of the immigrant population. In particular, one key point raised by all immigrant activists I interviewed was the importance of introducing local voting rights, a fair exchange for the many third-country nationals who do not have formal citizenship, but who contribute to the cities through taxation and exchanges with the local community.¹⁰ The immigrant activists I spoke with argued that local voting rights would prevent immigrants from being used by politics, including the Left. The lack of will on the part of the Left to introduce local voting rights for immigrants was a central issue that emerged during the interviews. Consider, for instance, the following statements from one of my interviewees:

In Italy, there is a political side that defends immigrants [the Left] and a side that is against them [the Right]. Both sides prevent immigrants *from speaking for themselves ... Immigrants are used by politics*. Immigrants ... do not have the power to negotiate politically, because they can't vote. The Left fears the right to vote, because that will allow us to speak for ourselves. (DP, Brescia)

This criticism was addressed to radical left organizations as well. "Why does the radical left never talk about the right to vote at the local level? The Left knows that if immigrants could vote, many would not vote for them" (DP, Bergamo).

Most of my interviewees pointed out that the Left's reluctance to introduce local voting rights created political apathy among the migrant population, with a consequent sense of political alienation and social and cultural marginalization *vis-à-vis* the receiving society. As one woman argued:

We have lost many years and now the political apathy of immigrants is a consolidated practice ... The Left should have promoted local voting rights to encourage a sense of belonging at the local level. Because this has not been done, the result is a complete disinterest in politics and more in general the withdrawal of many migrant communities from the broader Italian society. (Cultural mediator, Bologna)

To sum up, this section has pointed to the structural mechanisms by which the Left silence migrant activists. In the section below, I detail *why* the Left prevents immigrant activist from taking the floor and how this results in the de facto subordination of immigrants in their political organizations.

The “consumer paradigm” and political racialization

During my fieldwork, while digging into the Left’s reluctance to grant voting rights at the local level and, more generally, its refusal to allow immigrants effective power in the political arena, I was able to further investigate the process of political racialization by the Italian Left. One of my interviewees explained the existence of a “consumer paradigm” or a “paradigm of dependence and subordination” of immigrants’ in Italy that the Left helps to reproduce:

This is the country of mediation: do you have a problem?! It is the Italian organizations [such as the Catholic Church, trade unions, NGOs] that must deal with your problem. And you remain a “third” party, as if the thing did not concern you. When immigrants enter into Italy they are wedged in at the interior of an enormous paradigm of which the Left is also an important actor. In this paradigm the immigrant is represented as consumer, as someone who has to be served, and as passive subject. The discourse of the Left contributes to reproduce and reinforce this discourse. You are part of their discourse, because this legitimates those who talk on your behalf. The Left doesn’t want immigrants to become autonomous, because they want you to go to them and have them do things for you. (DP, Bologna)

According to my interviewees, immigrants occupy a subordinate position within the Italian paradigm of dependence or subordination vis-à-vis the Italian organizations. Therefore, in order to understand the Left’s tendency to silence the migrant population, we need to understand its function within this paradigm. From this point of view, we can argue that the Left contributes to including immigrants in the Italian society, but in a relation of subordination.

Democratic representation and political racialization

Barriers to representation are widespread in Italy. Recent research shows a very low level of representation of the migrant population in the Italian political parties and the main left-wing trade union, the CGIL, at both the national and the local levels (CGIL 2013; Cappiali 2015). Also, during my research in 2013, I found that no one with an immigrant background was elected at the regional level. As for the main left-wing trade union, the CGIL, recent research conducted by the organization shows the very low level of representation of the migrant population within this organization. While immigrant workers make up about 15 per cent of the total union membership, only 3 per cent of the union’s leadership is of immigrant background. What is more, their representation is generally at the level of delegates, that is, as representatives of workers (Italian and migrant) in the workplace. Delegates are usually elected on a democratic basis by their co-workers. However, there is no representation of immigrants as functionaries, where members

have roles of responsibility in the union at the level of their sector, or at the executive level, where members take decisions on behalf of the organization as a whole (Cappiali 2015; see also Mottura, Cozzi, and Rinaldini 2010).¹¹

I asked my interviewees about the barriers to democratic representation that existed in the Left, and the way in which this is linked to the problem of political racialization. I discussed with them the three main levels of representation described by Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust (2011): descriptive, symbolic, and substantive. The first indicator of democratic political inclusion is “descriptive representation”. This term refers to the number of people of immigrant background who have roles of responsibility in political organizations. Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust (2011, 5) observe that, “systematic exclusion of a group from elected office tends to signal [that] group’s exclusion from full membership in the political community”. Additionally, enhancing group representation is crucial to the progress of democratic and pluralistic inclusion. Representation can make available “less intimidating channels” through which marginalized groups can convey their own preferences outside periodic elections. It also introduces “new perspectives and [a] broader range of reasons to [engage in] democratic debate” (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust 2011).

Most of my interviewees were very critical of the role of left-wing organizations in preventing greater descriptive representation. They all agree that the low level of descriptive representation was the result of the *lack of will* on the part of the Left to open up to diversity and pluralism and to assume the implications of being truly inclusive. Some also added another criticism: the *real* barrier was *mistrust* towards immigrants due to prejudice and racism. Talking about the CGIL, a long-time member of the union told me: “If there is little or no representation, it means that there is racism! In the CGIL there is a widespread idea that *Italians* are more trustworthy than *immigrants*” (CGIL, Reggio Emilia).

My interviewees also condemned the ways in which the Left used “symbolic representation”. Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust (2011, 5) explain the importance of the “symbolic value of representation”. A party or union leadership that accurately reflects the diversity of its membership sends a message about the importance of giving greater voice to marginalized groups in society. Over the years, Italian left-wing organizations have promoted this approach in many ways, by making more “visible” activists who had an immigrant background (see Cappiali 2015). However, when I asked my interviewees about this topic, they argue that the Left adopted this practice instrumentally, to gain legitimacy in the political arena, rather than working in favour of greater inclusion for the migrant population. My interviewees highlighted the presence of practices of co-optation and tokenism. These practices were seen as a way of attracting immigrants to one’s organization, while nonetheless ensuring that they would not be able to exercise any actual power. On this point, I could observe that left-wing groups selected

immigrants for certain positions based on their ethnic background, in an attempt to attract particular ethnic groups into their organizations.¹² Processes of ethnicization or racialization were particularly visible. In more recent years, tokenism was also based on the representation of “immigrants” as a broader category, commonly used by left-wing organizations and migrant themselves. Nonetheless, the specific use of symbolic representation as a specific mechanism of racialization used in the past for specific ethnic groups was still holding.

Tokenism and instrumental use of symbolic representation were strongly felt as major obstacles to achieving the most important form of political inclusion: “substantive representation”. According to Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust (2011, 6), this latter form of representation tells us “what a representative does, and who he or she speaks for”. I use this term to refer to the level of substantial inclusion of those immigrant activists who hold roles of responsibility in left-wing organizations. Substantive inclusion can be captured by looking at two aspects: (1) the extent to which immigrant activists in roles of responsibility are able to speak out and negotiate their interaction with other members of the organization on an equal footing; and (2) the extent to which immigrants are recognized for their individual skills and characteristics. Most of my interviewees explained that being elected or appointed as a representative in the political party or trade union was the first step towards greater autonomy and self-determination, but that this was not enough. They observed that left-wing organizations stood in the way of those who had been elected, and, instead of valorizing their individual competencies and merits, promoted their compliance and subordination through, among other things, paternalistic attitudes. One of my interviewees, the Assessor of Integration in the province of Bologna, told me:

The role occupied by *immigrants* in Italy in any political organization is mainly based on compliance. If one of us is Assessor of Integration – as in my case – regrettably, he is not doing anything else but answering to the consumer paradigm of immigrants. Because the mayor, when he appointed me, thought he was doing a favor to the cause, instead of thinking that I am actually competent. This is why, instead of working on communication, which is my specialty, I am given the role of Assessor of Integration, which reminds me that this is supposed to be my role: *an immigrant working for other immigrants*. (DP, Bologna)

Other activists pointed out the presence of different forms of exclusion of the immigrants in leadership positions, including prejudice on the base of race and religion, fear of the “Other”, and a lack of meritocracy. Overall, they all agree that these mechanisms were systematically racializing migrant activists within the organizations of which they were members. I asked one of the elected councils of migrant background if he thought there was equal treatment in the political party. He answered: “I am afraid there is no equal treatment! I call their approach ‘Democratic racism’! I hold

the Left responsible for reproducing mistrust and prejudice within their organizations" (DP, Reggio Emilia).

To sum up, all my interviewees spoke of strong structural barriers to democratic representation on the Left. These barriers worked to *racialize* immigrant representatives, producing a situation of differential inclusion within the left-wing organizations. This relation of power then persists precisely because immigrant activists are constructed as "outsiders" or inferior "Others", in a binary narrative that produces the Us/Them distinction.

Immigrant activists challenging political racialization

My study suggests that immigrant activists are resisting and challenging the process of political racialization produced by the Italian Left. Their trajectories are multiple and rich in activity, but those I spoke with all reflected a similar will to transform the Italian Left from within, breaking the persistent construction that sees them as outsiders, and challenging the tendency to externalize them by defining them as "immigrants". First, even though they had different strategies to achieve their goals, they all expressed openly the need to break with the Left's tendency to silence their voices. They shared the idea that, it was about time to start taking the floor without asking. One of my interviewees, politically active since the beginning of the 1990s, told me:

In the 1990s, there were the first attempts by immigrant activists in Italy to rebel against the tendency by the Left to talk on our behalf. ... In 2001 there was the first *substantial* rebellion. We created our own organization and called it, the Immigrant Committee of Italy. It lasted only two years, but represented nonetheless a qualitative leap because we showed that we were persons above all and not a homogenous category. We have political opinions, rivalries, and conflicts. We shared everything with any other political movement. (RL, Milan)

Second, immigrant activists pointed out the need to go beyond the Us/Them binary distinction conveyed by the Left, by refraining from reproducing this narrative themselves.

We need to move away from the idea that *we are immigrants*, and start taking care of our city and its real problems. We [the immigrants] will fall behind if we are not able to make this qualitative leap: once we overcome the "immigrant" label, we must act as people who are part of this society. (DP, Brescia)

Third, for some interviewees, the way to break with political racialization was through mainstream politics. To assume even a minimal role within the political party was believed to be the beginning of proactive participation. One interviewee elected at the administrative level told me:

This is the threshold! Immigrants who come to Italy are represented as users, as those who are served. My goal consists of saying the opposite ... that we are citizens, legitimized with full rights to occupy the role of those who administrate and take decisions, not only of those who receive services. (DP, Bologna)

Others interviewees felt the need to challenge the Left outside mainstream politics. One of my interviewees told me: “‘Participation’ is synonymous with self-determination. It means to ‘speak for oneself.’ Our organization [of radical left] is the voice of *immigrants, for immigrants*” (RL, Brescia). Overall, even though mostly suffocated and opposed, migrants and ethnic minorities resist their political marginalization in multiple ways, depending on their political views, interests and understanding of immigrants’ conditions in Italy.

Conclusion

This article explained that the Italian Left, despite its rhetoric that immigrants should take part in political life and speak for themselves, has resisted the efforts that immigrants have made towards political self-determination. Taking my cue from Gandhi’s expression, “Whoever talks for you without you is against you!” – an expression widely used among immigrant activists in Italy – I unpacked the mechanisms by which the Left keeps silencing the “voice of immigrants”, producing what I called *political racialization*. I used this analytical tool to explore how left-wing organizations have de facto systematically silenced and politically marginalized the migrant population and created a relationship of “ethnic” or “racial” subordination. Additionally, I argued that political racialization had a negative impact on efforts to include immigrants in Italian society. By systematically preventing immigrants from taking the floor and shaping their struggles for recognition, the Italian Left has contributed to the political apathy of immigrants and ethnic minorities and to the alienation of their communities. It can be further argued that, in doing so, the Left has obstructed the transformation of Italy into a more inclusive democracy by preventing immigrants and ethnic minorities from contributing to the development of a pluralistic, democratic society, in which multiple voices can be expressed and heard (see Pojmann 2006, 133). Furthermore, my research highlighted that, notwithstanding major obstacles, immigrant activists have fought and are still fighting to express their political subjectivity.

By focusing on the case of Italy, this study has only scratched the surface of several issues that bear on the relationship between immigrant activists and their “native” supporters. By way of conclusion, I want to highlight some potentially fruitful avenues of research. First, we need more comparative systematic research to assess the responses of the Left to immigration and its role in failed processes of integration in different Western democracies. More in general, we should assess how the Left is mobilizing around issues of equality and social justice in the face of “changing boundaries of citizenship” in the neo-liberal era (Jenson and Papillon 2000). Second, studies of the historical evolution of various alliances are needed in order to understand how, in different countries, the Left has responded over the years to the quest of immigrants and ethnic minorities for greater inclusion in general, and political

participation in particular. This article suggested that the Left has been unable to fulfil its promise of greater equality and inclusion, and has been slow in understanding what was at stake in the promotion of greater inclusion of the migrant population beyond self-preservation. We need to deepen our knowledge on why this was the case. Third, further investigation should be carried on to assess how processes of “othering” in receiving societies work along immigrant statuses as well as ethnic, racial, religious, gender, and class lines. Feminist and diaspora studies have shown the importance of looking at their intersection in different systems of oppression (El-Tayeb 2011; Aly 2016). Among other things, we should assess how experience of complex forms of oppression affect the oppressed ones’ “subjectivity and a specific standpoint and specific political interests” (Lépinard 2014, 2) as well as the ways in which immigrants and ethnic minorities mobilize and make their voice heard notwithstanding powerful opposition (see, for instance, Pojmann 2008; El-Tayeb 2011; Kassir and Reitz 2016).

Notes

1. Some exceptions are represented by the works by Pojmann (2008), Nicholls (2013) and Cappiali 2016.
2. To simplify, I use the expression “immigrant activists” to refer to people of migrant background with different statuses, including Italian citizens of migrant background.
3. During the pacifist mobilization for the independence of India under British colonial rule, Gandhi used this expression to tell his Christian allies to let Indians take up their own struggles for freedom.
4. I avoid the concept of “differential inclusion” as Mezzadra and Neilson (2010) used it for a different analytical purpose than mine.
5. The Democratic Party is the main social-democratic party in Italy. It was created on 4 October 2007 by former members of the Democrats of the Left (heirs of the Italian Communist Party) and the Democracy is Freedom Party, a small party with Catholic roots.
6. I will use the abbreviations DP to refer to the interviews with immigrants active in the Democratic Party and RL for those active in various radical left organizations.
7. The increasingly hostile environment towards the migrant population is reflected in two laws introduced by two right-wing majorities with a strong presence of the anti-immigrant parties, the Northern League: Law 189/2002, also known as the Bossi-Fini Law, and Laws 125/2008 and 94/2009, also known as the Security Package (Pacchetto Sicurezza). This legislation has been criticized for denying that immigration is a structural phenomenon, for failing to address major issues linked to an increasingly diverse population and for having made immigrant workers highly vulnerable, due to its implementation of institutional racism (Oliveri 2012, 2015).
8. I owe this insight to two founders of the Immigrant Committee of Italy.
9. For an overview of these channels (see Kosic and Triandafyllidou 2005; Mantonvan 2007; Cappiali 2015).

10. Like other European countries, Italy has not introduced local voting rights for third-countries nationals.
11. In 2014, there was only immigrant activist who was a member of the national executive of a trade union, the USB.
12. The CGIL used extensively this strategy with the goal of unionizing immigrant workers to avoid the decline of the union in face of the decrease in number of native-born Italian workers.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to the anonymous referees for their insightful comments. She also thanks Jane Jenson, Pascale Dufour, Tiziana Caponio, Johanne J. Jean-Pierre and Peter Braun for their useful advice during the production of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This research was financially supported by the IRTG-Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces Programme.

References

- Aly, M. K. R. 2016. *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity*. London: Pluto Press.
- Anderson, B. 2010. "Migration, Immigration Controls and the Fashioning of Precarious Workers Work." *Work, Employment and Society*, 24 (2): 300–317.
- Bird, K., T. Saalfeld, and A. M. Wust, eds. 2011. *Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities: Voters, Parties and Parliaments in Liberal Democracies*. London: Routledge.
- Bloemraad, I. 2006. *Becoming Citizens: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugee in the United States and Canada*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Caponio, T. 2005. "Policy Networks and Immigrants" Associations in Italy: The Cases of Milan, Bologna and Naples." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31 (5): 931–950.
- Cappiali, T. M. 2015. "Activism and Participation Among People of Migrant Background : Discourses and Practices of Inclusiveness in Four Italian Cities." Political Science. Doctoral diss., Unpublished, Université de Montréal, Montreal. <https://papyrus.bib.umontreal.ca/xmlui/handle/1866/13579>.
- Cappiali, T. M. 2016. "Activism of Immigrants in Vulnerable Conditions and Radical Left Allies: A Case Study of Italy's Struggle of the Crane." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2016.1169917.
- CGIL. 2013. "Conferenza Regionale CGIL Emilia-Romagna sull'immigrazione." *Bologna*, June 10.
- Chaudhary, A. R. 2015. "Racialized Incorporation: The Effects of Race and Generational Status on Self-Employment and Industry-Sector Prestige in the United States." *International Migration Review*, 49 (2): 318–354.

- Cobbe, L., and G. Grappi. 2011. "Primo marzo, percorsi di uno sciopero inatteso." In *La normale eccezione. Lotte migranti in Italia*, edited by F. Mometti, and M. Ricciardi, 55–90. Rome: Edizioni Alegre.
- Cosseron, S. 2007. *Dictionnaire de l'extrême gauche*. Paris: Larousse.
- El-Tayeb, F. 2011. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Post-National Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Garbaye, R. 2005. *Getting Into Local Power: The Politics of Ethnic Minorities in British and French Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hochschild, J., J. Cahttopadhyay, C. Gay, and M. Jones-Correa, eds. 2013. *Outsiders No More: Models of Immigrant Political Incorporation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jenson, J., and M. Papillon. 2000. "The Changing Boundaries of Citizenship: A Review and a Research Agenda." In *Modernizing Governance: A Preliminary Exploration*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development. http://www.cccg.umontreal.ca/pdf/CPRN/CPRN_Chnging%20Boundaries.pdf.
- Kassir, A., and J. G. Reitz. 2016. "Protesting Headscarf ban: A Path to Becoming More French? A Case Study of 'Mamans Toutes égales' and 'Sorties scolaires avec nous'." *Racial and Ethnic Studies*. doi:10.1080/01419870.2016.1171371.
- Kosic, A., and A. Triandafyllidou. 2005. *Active Civic Participation of Immigrants in Italy*. Country Report prepared for the European Research Project POLITIS. Oldenburg 2005. www.ubi-oldenbrug.de/politis-europe.
- Lépinard, É. 2014. "Doing Intersectionality Repertoires of Feminist Practices in France and Canada." *Gender & Society* XX (X): 1–27. doi:10.1177/0891243214542430.
- Maldonado, M. M. 2009. "It is their Nature to do Menial Labor': The Racialization of "Latino/A Workers" by Agricultural Employers." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 32 (6): 1017–1036.
- Mantovan, C. 2007. *Immigrazione e Cittadinanza. Auto-organizzazione e Partecipazione dei Migranti in Italia*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.
- Marchetti, S., and F. Scrinzi. 2014. "Gendered and Racialised Construction of Work in Bureaucratised Care Services in Italy." EUI Working Paper Robert Schuman Center for Advance Studies 2014/123.
- Mezzadra, S., and B. Neilson. 2010. "Borderscapes of Differential Inclusion: Subjectivity and Struggles on the Threshold of Justice's Excess." In *The Borders of Justice*, edited by É. Balibar, S. Mezzadra, and R. Samaddar, 181–203. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Mottura, G., S. Cozzi, and M. Rinaldini. 2010. *Uscire da Babele. Percorsi e problemi del rapporto tra sindacato e lavoratori immigrati*. Rome: Ediesse.
- Nicholls, J. W. 2013. "Fragmenting Citizenship: Dynamics of Cooperation and Conflict in France's Immigrant Rights Movement." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36 (4): 611–631.
- Oliveri, F. 2012. "Migrants as Activist Citizens in Italy: Understanding the New Cycle of Struggles." *Citizenship Studies* 16 (5–6): 793–806.
- Oliveri, F. 2015. "Subverting Neoliberal Citizenship: Migrant Struggles for the Right to Stay in Contemporary Italy." *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14 (2): 492–503.
- Però, D. 2005. "Left-Wing Politics, Civil Society and Immigration in Italy: The Case of Bologna." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (5): 832–858.
- Però, D. 2007. *Inclusionary Rhetoric/Exclusionary Practices: Left-Wing Politics and Migrants in Italy*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Pojmann, W. 2006. *Immigrant Women and Feminism in Italy*. Burlington: Ashgate/Aldershot.

- Pojmann, W., ed. 2008. *Migration and Activism in Europe Since 1945*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Voss, K., and I. Bloemraad, eds. 2011. *Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in 21st Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.