

‘Ethnic Democracy’ and Authoritarian Legacies in Italy’s and Australia’s Contemporary Policies towards ‘Boat People’

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Abstract

Asylum-seekers constitute a small percentage of the entire Italian and Australian populations and the volume of the claims recorded in these two countries is below those of many other industrialized and non-industrialized countries. Although the tendency is to frame this issue as ‘moral panic’ and to implement ‘emergency’ measures, this article argues that this attitude conceals a long-established institutional tradition of racism and control directed not only at asylum-seekers, but against ‘otherized’ communities. By drawing on Smooha’s (2009) concept of ‘ethnic democracy’, we suggest that the legacies of ‘White Australia’ and ‘Fascist Italy’ continue to play a key role in fostering new ethnocentric ‘Italian’ and ‘Australian’ identities.

Keywords: ‘boat people’; emergency measures; ‘ethnic democracy’; Italy; Australia

In this article, the Italian and Australian governments’ policies towards asylum-seekers are contextualized by looking at current theories on the use of ‘emergency’ as a frame for political action (e.g. Honig, 2009, 2014; Walters, 2011). These individuals are basically constructed as

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‘permanent migrants’, becoming ‘abjects’, neither subjects, nor objects, living ‘inexistent states of transient permanence’ (Isin and Rygiel, 2007: 198). This conceptualization clearly matches with what Walters (2011: 138) calls the ‘emergence of the humanitarian border’. As Walters argues, the humanitarian construction of the measures towards the asylum-seekers turns them into something acceptable within strategies of control. In this context, ‘emergency’ measures are designed to contain a problem rather than solve it, and in so doing establish a permanent practice of exclusion and marginalization.¹ Both in Italy and Australia these approaches are framed as top-down crisis interventions, characterized by short-term responses, but lacking medium- and long-term strategies. Honig’s work (2009, 2014) helps to clarify this point, reminding us that emergencies are much more common than we think.

The securitization of migration across the globe may suggest that the reactions enacted by these two governments are not unique. The growing emphasis on border control is a phenomenon which cannot be confined to the ‘global North’ (Johnson, 2014: 65). There is, in fact, growing evidence of current global trends of border securitization, which has led to the criminalization of immigration and the creation of ‘prison-like’ detention centres (Aas and Bosworth, 2013). This comparative study aims to show that, although Italy and Australia inhabit different geopolitical contexts, they also display parallels. The uniqueness of Italy’s and Australia’s policies with regard to this issue is part of a well-established historical trend of controlling practices directed towards the ‘other’. In fact, the governments of both countries often resort to extraordinary measures to deal with other controversial social issues (see recent ‘Northern Territory Emergency Response’ [NTER] and ‘Nomad Emergency Decree’ directed at Aboriginal and Romani/‘Gypsy’ peoples, respectively). We argue that restrictive migration policies are not only a side-effect of the propagating idea of a global ‘(in)security’ and the development of a transnational police network (Bigo, 2006; Huysmans, 2000), but they have deeper historical roots. Colonial legacies, in fact, are deeply embedded in contemporary policies which, similarly to the post-Unification/Federation period, privilege ethnocentric Italian or Australian identities.

The adoption of emergency measures is surely in line with the concept of ‘moral panic’, based on grossly exaggerated or misdirected public fear over a perceived threat to social order (Cohen, 2002; Krinsky, 2013). However, this theoretical framework can only partially inform the way ‘boat people’ (or marine arrivals) have been constructed. In fact, this study aims to go beyond the conceptualization of policies as constructing their subjects as mere objects of power and acknowledges them as fundamentally ideological devices. By codifying social norms and

values, policies do also contain implicit models of society. As instruments of governance they aim to organize people within systems of power and authority, empowering some while silencing others. The Romani and Aboriginal peoples constitute two emblematic cases of this attitude. These minorities are also subjected to special policies which pathologize their cultures and make them ungovernable or prone to violence, crime and social collapse. This signifies the emergence of a new form of racism that moves from ‘biology’ to making ‘culture’ the site of pathology (Clarke, 2008) and thus a pretext for state intervention (Armillei, 2014a; Kramer, 2012). Besides, proliferating discourses and exclusionary practices, not limited to Romanies and Aborigines—their case, in fact, could be compared to the case of Muslim citizens (see, for instance, Alietti and Padovan, 2013; Salleh-Hoddin and Pedersen, 2012)—, gained strength and are no longer limited to extreme Right movements (Re, 2010). It is thus no surprise that refugees are constructed as ‘impenetrable, incomprehensible, sinister aliens’ (Bauman, 1999, cited in Naidoo *et al.*, 2015: 77).

As part of this ‘otherizing’ process, the ‘us’ (ethnic majority), who are the same and share a common fate, common values and common behaviours, is constructed in opposition to ‘them’ within discourses of belonging and un-belonging (Tilbury, cited in Naidoo, 2014: 100). In a context where, as Newman (2005: 19) states, national borders still function as the territorial demarcators of state control, citizenship and, in some cases, national identity, this research will maintain that the Italian and Australian governments’ policies towards asylum-seekers, as well as ‘otherized’ communities in general, can be interpreted as derivative of the model of ‘ethnic democracy’ theorized by Smootha (2001, 2009). According to this theory some of the different ethnic groups are viewed as inassimilable into mainstream society, allowing the ethnic majority to install a form of democracy with a strong ethno-nationalist drive. Rather than serving all its citizens equally, an ‘ethnic democracy’ privileges a supposed ethnic majority and its interest. Using Smootha’s (2009, p. 56) words:

If the ethnic majority perceives serious threats and thinks that its control over the state can effectively contain these threats, and wields such control while maintaining democratic procedures and norms to which the majority is committed, ethnic democracy is a rational choice.

In a globalized world, the existence of multicultural societies has become an indisputable fact (Nye, 2007). In order to deal with an increasing cultural diversity, Italy has been promoting its own approach based on intercultural theory and practice, but ‘diversity was never seriously considered, let alone contributing to a re-definition of Italian identity in pluralistic terms’ (Armillei, 2016). Australia, however, has embraced cultural diversity as its constitutive feature

and is now considered one of the forefathers of multicultural policies. Yet, non-British settlement in Australia has been always guided by a form of ‘economic opportunism’ rather than a real intention to change the ethnic make-up of the population and identity of the nation (Armillei and Mascitelli, 2017). In both contexts, a disengagement with the racist mechanisms underlying the ethnic majorities’ hegemony is evident and is perpetuated through historical narratives which excluded ‘othered’ perspectives. As observed by McAllan (2011: 1), ‘these mechanisms remain un-interrogated in public and political discourse, while systemic and institutionalised racism continues’. The dominance of an ‘Italian’ and ‘Australian’ ethnic majority remains largely unquestioned and unchallenged in these historical narratives. Critical race theory, which has been hardly applied, might help to challenge the exclusive character of Italian and Australian national identities (Love and Varghese, 2012). This article will thus make original and significant contributions to the ongoing debate raising questions as to how the Italian and Australian societies might be made more inclusive.

Our paper explores in a critical manner the literature emanating from the Italian and Australian governments. An in-depth literature review of the areas of interest was conducted examining the previous and current work of experts in the field of Italian and Australian history and identity to illustrate the contemporary government approach towards ‘othered’ communities and the impact of colonialist processes in constructing and maintaining white-dominated social hegemony. The project’s methodology aimed to create a comprehensive picture of the approach adopted by the government of these two countries not only towards ‘boat people’, but cultural diversity more broadly (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). This research approach combines theoretical conceptual analysis, exploratory analysis, social documents analysis, and critical analysis of public policies. A broad range of secondary sources (e.g. policy reports, committee papers, published treatises, newspapers and magazines) were used in order to gain a closer understanding of the reasons Italy and Australia keep adopting emergency-type of measures when dealing with issues that are deemed to represent a threat to the character of state identities. In this context, the issue of borders and invasion from outside, as well as the growing cultural diversity, have been used to promote a sense of national ‘insecurity’. Scapegoating attitudes emerged towards the Romanians and the Aboriginal people, for instance, often depicted as the ‘enemies’ within (Clough Marinaro, 2009; Moreton-Robinson, 2009). With regard to asylum-seekers, the introduction of increasingly selective immigration criteria has created discretionary authority, ‘a power of exception and a moment of sovereignty’ (Miggiano, 2009: 14). The role of nationalism in this governing of marginal

populations is surely central to the way the Italian and Australian governments have been constantly enacting emergency approaches in order to deal with ‘otherized communities’.

The next sections will offer important analyses of the Italian and Australian historical contexts. This will help to pinpoint the existence of long-term continuities between contemporary Italy and Australia and their national histories, the ‘Fascist’ and the ‘White Australia’ eras respectively. By placing the case of the ‘boat people’ within a wider historical perspective, we will argue that the presence of ongoing debates surrounding the definition of Italian and Australian identities and histories (Favero, 2010; Moses, 2008), the recent authoritarian approach towards the Romani and Aboriginal peoples, together with discriminatory laws and policies against immigrants, could all be interpreted as an indirect consequence of the government’s incapacity to deal with a shameful past and its unbroken ties. In doing so, this study provides an appraisal of the strategy enacted by Italian and Australian dominant elites to establish, renew and maintain the hierarchy underpinning their privilege. In other words, emergency measures, reinforced by the construction of a threat as ‘moral panic’, signal the ethnic majority’s intention to continue dominating the other groups.

1. Dominant national narratives and their implications for attitudes to the ‘other’

1.1 Italy and the Fascist era legacy

Since political unification in 1861, three main features have played a key role in shaping government policies towards cultural diversity, and the identity of Italians as a nation, namely: a history of authoritarian tendencies; a monocultural Catholic national narrative; and well-established racist attitudes (Armillei, 2014a). But the lack of an in-depth and cohesive analysis of national history has hampered acknowledgment of these approaches as a ‘temporal continuum’. The Fascist era, for instance, generally recognized as the darkest page in Italian history, is often described as if it was collateral damage in the process of democratic nation building. As a result, its roots in racism and imperialism under ‘liberal Italy’,² let alone its debt to post-war policy-making (the Christian Democrats’ long dominance), are minimized (Armillei, 2016). Interestingly, not until recently were the war crimes of the Fascist regime submitted to scrutiny. Among them, the persecution and internment of Italian Romanies remain highly under-studied. Italy has not yet officially acknowledged its responsibility for their genocide.³ For many years it was commonly believed that Fascism targeted Romanies ‘exclusively as a problem of public order and not as a racial issue, unlike the Nazi regime’

(Clough Marinaro, 2009: 273). The growth of national patriotism is now inducing historical amnesia and revisionism, which is harming the health of Italy's democratic polity (Ventresca, 2006: 17) while allowing racism to re-emerge, together with the 'myth of Italian kindness and moral superiority' (Re, 2010: 1).

Italy has a long tradition as a country of emigration with an estimated Italian migrant population of around 60 million all over the world (Ambrosini and Caneva, 2012). Only in the 1970s was it possible to detect a trend inversion, moving from being a net exporter of migrants to a net importer (Bonifazi *et al.*, 2009). The multicultural paradigm that developed in many parts of Europe (chiefly the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands) in those years has never taken root in Italy. At the beginning of the 1990s, instead, a lively debate on intercultural issues developed, particularly within the Italian educational system. In 2007, Italy claimed its own model of cultural diversity, the so-called 'Italian way to Interculture' (Rossi and De Angelis, 2012). Although in the last few decades its population has become increasingly diverse, Italy can be hardly defined as a multicultural society, a concept and model that are largely lacking (Armillei, 2015). On December 31, 2015, the foreign population could be quantified at 5,026,153, amounting to 8.3% of the national population (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica - ISTAT, 2016). Each year an increasing number of immigrants arrive, especially from Africa and Central and Eastern Europe, raising Italy's profile as an immigrant nation, marked by high-volume flows and intensive 'illegal' immigration (Allievi, 2010).

Despite this situation, Italian law and policy in the area of immigration are still struggling to catch up with this phenomenon (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions – COHRE, *et al.*, 2008: 11). Although immigrants contribute for about 8.8% of the Italian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Polchi, 2016), immigration still tends to be considered a socioeconomic 'emergency' rather than a structural phenomenon and a cultural or economic resource (Intercultural Dialogue, 2007). Within this context, the intercultural paradigm has slowly become a 'trendy' concept and has been adopted by local authorities in many projects that define themselves as 'intercultural', but too often employ the terminology uncritically. The Italian approach to cultural diversity can be best described as oscillating between entrenched ethnocentric 'monoculturalism' and an underdeveloped discourse around 'interculturalism' (Armillei, 2016). Migrants are racialized by the dominant culture which aim to homogenize Italian culture as 'White and European' (Love and Varghese, 2012: 13). They are seen as exogenous to Italian society and expected either to assimilate to the dominant culture or, in the worst case, be removed or expelled. Romani communities, in particular, have been subjected to

social exclusion for centuries. They are characterized as the outsider *par excellence* and have been often subjected to extraordinary actions. To this day, it is politically acceptable to pursue the institutionalization of Romanies in *campi nomadi* (nomad camps) and impose a state of emergency in doing so. That this policy approach provoked no public disquiet suggests a lingering legacy of Fascist and Nazi persecution.

1.2 Australia and the white settler legacy

Since the Second World War, Australia has resettled more than 700,000 refugees (Neumann, 2012), who have formed a significant proportion of the Australian population. British migrants alone could no longer satisfy an urgent need for labourers after the war. This first non-British mass migration flow rapidly changed Australia's demography, thereby laying the foundation for a multicultural Australia while beginning to undermine the project of building a 'White British' nation. For many years until the beginning of the 1970s, the so-called 'White Australia policy' intentionally restricted 'non-White' immigration to Australia, creating particularly anti-Asian forms of racism (Jupp, 2007). One goal of this approach was to 'keep down the Indigenous blacks' (Moses, 2011: 329). In 1973 'multiculturalism' was launched in recognition of a growing cultural diversity. Over the years, though, it has undergone irregular development and changing fortunes, always influenced by the ideology of the government in power (Lo Bianco, 2010). According to a number of scholars (e.g. Curthoys, 2000; Tilbury, 2007), just like the previous 'White Australia', 'multicultural Australia' was the result of a top-down political action, the best and most effective way to assimilate the massive arrival of continental European immigrants within the dominant culture. Its meaning is still debated and does not enjoy a univocal and shared interpretation (Henry and Kurzak, 2012; Lo Bianco, 2010).

Australia today is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world and multiculturalism is often presented as a distinctive characteristic of its unique success story (Bowen, 2013). Yet the legacy of colonialism and 'White Australia' is still visible. The 'Anglo-Celtic' factor still upholds the privilege to 'manage' multicultural settings and decide on the positioning of different ethnic groups within the national framework (Stratton, 1998). James Jupp (2007: 7), for instance, defined Australia as 'the "most British" society in the world outside the United Kingdom'. Hage (2000) coined the term 'White multiculturalism', arguing that Australian multiculturalism has a 'White-centric' past and an assimilationist present. This was particularly evident under John Howard, who oversaw a return to monoculturalism (Tilbury, 2007: 1). During his government, a 'retreat of multiculturalism' was clearly observable

(Jakubowicz, 2009). To this day, more than 80 former colonies have gained their independence across the globe (United Nations, 2016). Australian Aborigines, though, like many other Indigenous peoples, have never retaken possession of their land, and it is still debatable whether, in a sense, Australia has ever been decolonized (Curthoys, 2000). As Veracini (2010) put it, there is nowadays a constant attempt to produce and reproduce a supposedly ‘unbiased’ Australian history through a selective national narrative.

This attitude has supported the consolidation of systematic racism, ‘institutional in nature and practiced at all levels of society’ (Australian Human Rights Commission – AHRC, 2001: foreword). This becomes an obstacle to efforts at tracing the historical truth and acknowledging the ‘dark’ aspects of Australian history and identity, which fuels and reinforces a ‘collective consciousness of denial’ (McGrath, 1995: 1). The basis for terms such as ‘frontier conflicts’ (Attwood and Foster, 2003), ‘genocide’ (Palmer, 2000), ‘Stolen Generations’ (Read, 1982)—all products of British settlers striving to displace the Aborigines from their land—has not been fully acknowledged yet (Johnson-Riordan, 2006). Over the years, important steps towards recognizing Aboriginal rights have certainly been taken, driven by growing internal pressure from Aboriginal movements and their advocates, in connection with mounting international criticism of the ethnocentric and racial approach adopted by Australian institutions. Yet Aboriginal peoples still live ‘on the frontier’ in their own country (Havemann, 1999: 1). In 1968, the anthropologist Stanner had lamented that Aboriginal people had been almost completely excluded from Australian history, except for the bare trace of ‘a melancholy footnote’ (Stanner, 2009, 190). The ‘Great Australian Silence’, as he named it, over the history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, still exists to this day (Broom, 2015). It’s no wonder, then, that Indigenous people consistently protest against being framed as part of the multicultural discourse.

1.3 ‘Boat People’ in Italy

Due to its centrality astride the Mediterranean route, Italy has become in recent years ‘one of the most important gateways to the EU’ (International Commission of Jurists, 2014: 3). Between January 1, 1999 and August 31, 2014, 494,555 migrants were smuggled to Italian shores (Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014: 7). In 2015 and 2016, these numbers were 153,842 and 181,436 respectively (Loria, 2017). According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (2014: 48), Italy currently records the highest number of arrivals by sea. The vast majority were recorded in the south of Italy, mainly Sicily (83%). The harbours which recorded

the highest number of landings were Augusta (25,624), Pozzallo (18,970), Catania (17,989), Messina (15,188), Palermo (15,083) and Lampedusa (11,557). As for the nationality of the migrants, most of them were from Nigeria (37,551), Eritrea (20,718), Guinea (13,342), Ivory Coast (12,396), Gambia (11,929), Senegal (10,327), Mali (10,010), Sudan (9,327), Bangladesh (8,131) and Somalia (7,281). Yet boat arrivals represent only a fraction of the undocumented migrants residing in Italy. The majority of 'irregular' migration, in fact, consists of people arriving 'by plane or land, or as tourists who subsequently work and overstay' (Del Boca and Venturini, 2014: 5).

In recent years, border control measures, at both the Italian and European levels, have been intensified, mainly via bilateral agreements (e.g. with the former Libyan regime and Italy; Tunisia and France; Morocco and Spain), as observed by de Haas and Sigona (2012: 4). Although a more concerted effort has been gaining momentum, a true European response is still lacking (ECRE, 2014: 8). In November 2014, for instance, Frontex (the European border management agency) launched *Operation Triton* in response to the rising numbers of migrants trying to reach Europe across the Mediterranean. This new European Union mission began as the Italian rescue operation *Mare Nostrum* came to an end on October 31, 2014 (Motta, 2014). Yet, due to *Triton's* limited radius, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and human rights groups on several occasions expressed concern about the cessation of the Italian search-and-rescue operation. The UNHCR (2014) had previously welcomed *Mare Nostrum*, which helped in the rescue of some 150,000 refugees and migrants since the two tragedies off the coast of Lampedusa in October 2013.⁴ It is questionable, though, whether Italian and European efforts have actually reduced the total number of people crossing the Mediterranean (Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014). In fact, as UNHCR's figures show, in 2015 over one million people (1,000,573) reached Europe across the Mediterranean, mainly to Greece and Italy (Clayton and Holland, 2015).

As de Haas (2007: 65) has argued, restrictive migration policies aimed at 'combating' irregular migration, rather than 'solving' this issue, produce more 'illegality' over time. In turn, the problem's persistence has pushed public institutions 'to adopt even more restrictive policies'. In a more recent study de Haas and Sigona (2012: 4) reiterated the warning that more border controls would only increase irregular migration. Francalacci (2014) argues that, during the calendar year 2013, landings on Italian shores tripled (with 42,925 arrivals compared to some 13,000 in 2012). This was also due to escalating civil war in Syria (Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati, 2014) to which Italy has shown itself ill-prepared. A similar situation had already

occurred in 2011, when the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the collapse of the social and political fabric in Libya generated a high volume of irregular arrivals (62,695 persons, mainly from Tunisia and Libya; Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, 2013: 1). Expressions such as ‘human tsunami’ and ‘human flood’ were used in order to implement emergency policy measures and a ‘securitarian’ regime (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013). The immigration law has instituted ‘reception centres’, reiterating the language of hospitality, but stimulating highly politicized discourses around the notion of ‘stranger’, the alien who has to be kept under surveillance (Friese, 2010: 333).

If we consider that today only a portion of undocumented migrants (as of January 1, 2013 they were approximately 294,000 or 6% of the total foreign population; Fondazione ISMU, 2013) arrive in Italy by boat (for a map of major migratory routes to Italy see Canali, 2015), it could be argued that the push-back policy carried out by the Italian government from 2009 until October 2013, coinciding with the launch of *Mare Nostrum*, could not stop the rise of ‘illegal immigration’ or defeat its real causes (Hassan and Minale, 2010). Official records for the 2000-2006 period show a similar trend: between 4% and 16% of undocumented residents arrived in Italy by boat (European Commission, 2009: 73). The policy of externalizing border controls to North African countries (de Haas, 2007; de Haas and Sigona, 2012) certainly proved temporarily ‘successful in reducing arrivals by sea’ (Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, 2013). Relatively few arrivals were documented in 2009, 2010 and 2012 (9,600, 4,400 and 12,000, respectively). But the conformity of the Italian approach to international human rights and refugee law has been repeatedly questioned (Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, 2013: 5). At the same time, preferred routes into the EU had simply shifted, with many ‘boat people’ now going via Greece instead (Bethke and Bender, 2011).

1.4 ‘Boat people’ in Australia

Asylum-seekers have been arriving by boat in Australia since the mid-1970s, when the first ‘waves’ were fleeing the Vietnam War. Over the next two decades, ‘Australia was to resettle more than 100,000 Vietnamese refugees from various Asian countries. Only a small proportion, around 2000, came directly to Australia by boat to seek asylum’ (Refugee Council of Australia - RCOA, 2012: 3). It is particularly in the wake of increased marine arrivals in 1989 that the Australian government strengthened its policies towards ‘boat people’. In 1992, the Coalition (an alliance of largely centre-Right parties), by exploiting and contributing to public perception

of a migration ‘control crisis’, lent bipartisan support to mandatory detention (Garnier and Cox, 2012: 1). This involved excising external territories from the migration zone, and offshore processing. Enhanced coastal surveillance and increased engagement with transit countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia were also implemented to stop people smuggling at its source (Phillips and Spinks, 2013b: 10). Under the Howard government (1996-2007) the idea of ‘armadas’ of asylum-seeker boats coming to Australia was emphasized in order to spread the ‘spectre of a “national emergency”’ (Streatfeild, 2011: 51-52).

However, as Garnier and Cox (2012) argue, the differential treatment of asylum-seekers arriving by boat, the desirability of offshore processing, and the necessity of mandatory detention became part of a bipartisan consensus. In this context, Phillips (2009: 131) refers to the approach used by Australian armed forces, police and customs officials as if they were ‘waging a war’ on asylum-seekers to secure the nation-state’s border. This takes the form of either spectacular mediatized incidents of violence or low-level surveillance, control and invisible violence. In a more recent article, MacCallum (2014) uses the ‘language of war’ concept to describe the Abbott government’s political doctrine. According to him, a military campaign against asylum-seekers has been adopted as political camouflage, partly to inflate the importance of an ‘irritant’ issue, and partly to justify the cult of secrecy in order to cover government mismanagement. As Stratton (2009: 679) argued:

The engineering of the Australian population’s anxieties and fears around race and immigration, [...] which were embodied in asylum seekers, served the same purpose for the eleven years the Coalition was in office.

Mid-2001 represented a crucial moment in Australian asylum-seeker policy (Klocker, 2004). Following a highly-politicized incident at the end of August 2001, in which rescued asylum-seekers on board a Norwegian ship (the *Tampa*) were denied access to Australia, the legislative scheme known as the *Pacific Solution* was implemented by the Coalition (Mansted, 2007). The new approach provided the government with the power, among other things, to remove any unauthorized ship from Australian waters while ensuring that no asylum applications were made by people on board the ship (State Library of New South Wales, 2011: 29). In September 2001, the terrorist attacks in the USA were a watershed in international relations among, and domestic policies within, various states. As Lafraie (2006: 110) argues, though, many countries, just like Australia, had already begun adopting tough policies and harsh measures towards asylum-seekers before 9/11. Then in early October 2001, just a few weeks prior to the federal election, the ‘Children Overboard’ incident was widely reported in the media, becoming a pivotal issue during the political campaign. The Australian government accused asylum-seekers

of throwing children into the ocean in an attempt to blackmail it into granting them asylum (Herd, 2006).

By looking at data elaborated by the RCOA (2016), Australia received 16,117 asylum applications in 2015 (20,677 asylum applications were still pending) and recognized 2,377 asylum-seekers as refugees (0.1% of the global total). This represents just 0.33% of the 4.9 million new asylum applications lodged in 2015 worldwide. As for the number of refugees recognized, registered or resettled in the same year, 0.48% were assisted by Australia (11,776 people). According to the RCOA, this is how Australia was ranked in 2015: 25th and 35th by total number of refugees and of asylum claims, respectively; 32nd and 45th on a per capita basis; 47th and 61st relative to national GDP. The number of asylum-seekers arriving in Australia by boat peaked at 25,173 in the financial year 2012-13. Boat arrivals dropped to 7,674 in 2013-14 and to 158 in 2014-15 (Parliament of Australia, 2017). In 2014, at least 348,000 people risked their lives in boats seeking asylum or a better life around the world. Interestingly, most of these (207,000) were recorded attempting to cross the Mediterranean, while approximately 54,000 people embarked on irregular maritime journeys in the Asia-Pacific region. However, the vast majority (53,000) departed from Bangladesh and Myanmar on their way to Thailand or Malaysia, and only a handful towards Australia (Phillips, 2015). As a consequence, the RCOA (2010: 1) states that ‘these figures should put to rest any claims that Australia is being “flooded” by asylum seekers’. Nevertheless, successive governments and media have perpetuated the myth of Australia being swamped by ‘boat people’, with public opinion growing more hostile at the frightening idea of national borders being ‘out of control’ (Hartcher, 2013: 22).

2. Contemporary examples of dominant group supremacy and ethnocentric approaches

Recent approaches in dealing with marginalized Romani and Aboriginal peoples are emblematic. These two minorities represent a very small proportion of their national populations—0.25% in Italy (Associazione 21 Luglio, 2015) and 3% in Australia (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, 2015)—and still suffer serious disadvantage due to a long history of discrimination and racism. To address this situation and improve these people’s lives, the Italian and Australian governments have enacted what they both term ‘extraordinary measures’. Although the 2007 NTER and the 2008 ‘Nomad Emergency’ developed from very peculiar premises, their authoritarian tendency attracted bipartisan convergence and had similar effects on their targeted communities. The enactment of these policies aimed to address socioeconomic

disadvantage and contribute to a better quality of life among Romanies and Aboriginals. However, they amplified a well-established tendency to disempower and trap these peoples within a system of ‘welfare dependency’ (Anderson, 2007; Armillei, 2014b; Cugusi, 2011; Macoun, 2011). A lack of self-representation is often used to justify paternalistic approaches, while consolidating a well-rooted mechanism of control and assimilatory practices (Howard-Wagner, 2010; Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2009).

In 2007 allegations of the sexual abuse of children in Aboriginal communities in Australia’s Northern Territory brought Indigenous issues to national attention (Anderson and Wild, 2007: 7). This case was used by the Howard Coalition government as a way to implement an extraordinary measure, the NTER. In both cases, the declaration of a ‘state of emergency’ was strategically constructed by describing Romani and Aboriginal communities as ‘national disasters’ (Fiorucci, 2010; Manton, 2011) requiring special measures. In Italy, a number of high-profile crimes such as the violent murder of Mrs Giovanna Reggiani in October 2007, allegedly committed by people of Romani ethnicity, were extensively reported, exacerbating aggressive anti-Romani rhetoric (Amnesty International, 2012). The presence of Romani peoples came to be addressed as a security issue, leading to the ‘Nomad Emergency’. Eventually, the NTER was ‘presumed to be illegitimate’, as recently stated by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous people (UNHRC, 2010: 8), and the ‘Nomad Emergency’ was considered ‘unfounded and unsubstantiated’, as reported by Amnesty International (2012: 8) in its recent briefing to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

Yet an emergency-type of approach to these peoples is still in place today (Altman and Russell, 2012; Armillei, 2014a; Korff, 2015). This would suggest that, as theorized by Agamben (1998), lawful enforcement of a ‘state of exception’ can morph into a new permanent political category, despite the initial announcement of its provisional aim (Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Sigona, 2005). In Italy, although the government did not introduce a new official national policy to improve the conditions of the Romanies, it keeps promoting an emergency approach, based on the highly criticized ‘camps policy’ and forced evictions (Forleo, 2015). As for Australia, the ‘Stronger Futures Programme’—a 10 years initiative introduced in 2011 (AHRC, 2012)—has replaced the previous NTER. Besides, these extraordinary measures were not the result of a sudden, unexpected situation requiring an immediate action, as the word ‘emergency’ might imply. On the contrary, the extreme poverty of the Romanies living in ‘nomad camps’ and of Aboriginal ‘fringe dwellers’ should be understood as the result of protracted institutional

racism towards them. In other words, the implementation of extraordinary measures was the result of a 'precise political will' (Guarnieri, as cited in Russo Spina, 2007, para. 3) or 'deliberate neglect' (Day, as cited in Crawford, 2013). This attitude has basically created the 'emergency' and the premises for a 'state of exception' as a circular response.

3. 'Ethnic democracy' at play

The model of 'ethnic democracy' was elaborated for the first time by Smooha in 2001. Its defining features, the circumstances leading to it and the conditions contributing to its stability had been originally introduced as applied to Israel, defined as an archetype and a springboard for its initial formulation. According to Smooha (2001), 'ethnic democracy' is inherently different from the two major western forms of democracy: liberal democracy (e.g. USA, France) and consociational democracy (e.g. Belgium, Switzerland). While in the first case 'ethnicity' is privatized, with the nation-state maintaining and fostering a single language, culture and identity in order to better assimilate the population, in the second one the main ethnic groups are recognized and managed through a series of mechanisms to reduce ethnic conflict (power-sharing, proportionality, veto power and politics of negotiation and compromise). As for the 'ethnic democracy', Smooha (2001: 477) points out the existence of states manifestly ethnic (e.g. Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, all post-communist states defining themselves as states of a single ethnic nation), but also recognizes the spreading of this model among consolidating democracies with a record of ethnic nationalism.

In particular, Smooha refers to 'ethnicity', not 'citizenry', as the cornerstone of this type of democracy, which is characterized by the inherent contradiction between ethnic ascendance and civic equality. In fact, he used the term 'diminished' democracy to describe a state that, rather than serving all its citizens equally, privileges the majority and strives to advance its interest (Smooha, 2002: 478). In this context, the 'ethnic nation', while shaping symbols, laws and policies of the state for the benefit of the majority, create the 'others' as less desirable persons who cannot be full members of the society. Interestingly, Smooha (2002) also refers to a more recent, hybrid, form of democratic system, which he calls 'multicultural democracy'. Smooha describes in positive terms the shift towards multiculturalism that during the past thirty years characterized the liberal West (Smooha, 2002: 496). Surely by softening the dichotomy between liberal and consociational democracies, this emerging type of democracy recognizes cultural rights of minorities, but it neither makes these rights official nor institutionalizes the standard mechanisms of consociational democracy (van den Berghe 2002, cited in Smooha,

2002).

Enmeshed in different geo-political contexts, Italy and Australia have adopted their own cross-cultural paradigms towards cultural diversity—interculturalism and multiculturalism, respectively—with the official aim to foster tolerance of ethnic heterogeneity. This paper suggests that, despite established rhetoric emphasizing inclusion, supposedly providing ‘non-core groups’ with more political participation, influence, and improvement of status, these two countries’ policy approaches could be better described as forms of political theatre/rhetoric (Kymlicka, 2012: 214). Following the model of ‘ethnic democracy’ theorized by Smootha (2001), in both the Italian and Australian contexts the (White) ‘core ethnic groups’ have enjoyed institutionalized supremacy long before the introduction of democracy. In the first case, Mussolini had succeeded in re-activating a number of latent *Risorgimento* (which literally means resurrection) topoi, such as the sense ‘of belonging to a distinct racial family, ethnic community’, or ‘stock’ (Re, 2010). In the second case, instead, the British colonizer, with the introduction of the ‘White Australia policy’, started shaping the human landscape, by dispossessing Aboriginal peoples of their land and restricting the immigration of non-White people (Veracini, 2010). Since the end of the Second World War the previous discriminatory government doctrines were slowly dismantled.

Yet, following the model elaborated by Smootha, instead of renouncing their traditional, structured dominance, there are clear signs of ‘core ethnic groups’ trying to make the new democracy serve them in a form of ‘ethnic democracy’. In Italy, for instance, until the early 1980s Fascists came to play a key role as an anti-communist entity and there was a combination of *coups d'état* attempts and terrorism possibly aiming at establishing a military state (Celani, 2004; Roberts, 2010). In Australia, instead, with the massive arrival of ‘continental European immigrants’, the ‘Anglo-Celtic factor’ maintained the privilege to ‘manage’ multicultural settings and decide on the relative positioning of different ethnic groups within the national framework (Hage, 2000; Jakubowicz, 2003). More recent authoritarian approaches, particularly directed against ‘non-core’ ethno-cultural groups (immigrants, national minorities, Indigenous peoples), promote an ongoing sense of threat, which represents one of the condition for the survival of the ‘ethnic democracy’. Interestingly, there is a well-established attitude among Italian and Australian mainstream societies to sustain the emergency policies constantly reiterated by the government of these two countries. In the case of ‘boat people’, this is often the result of misinformation and confusion concerning ‘unauthorized/illegal’ arrivals (Isernia and Olmastroni, 2014; Markus, 2014; Pagnoncelli, 2014; Phillips and Spinks, 2013a).

Conclusions

In the last few decades the Mediterranean and Pacific have been crossed by the centripetal trajectories of people in their hundreds of thousands fleeing war, violence and persecution. Italy and Australia slowly became two major destinations for migratory flows, coming mainly from African and Asian countries, respectively. Often, such migrants embark on a risky boat journey in hopes of getting to a safe haven. Unfortunately, tragedies at sea are not uncommon, with ships sinking on these perilous voyages and people perishing in their quest for a better life. Governments in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region have tried over the years to introduce more co-ordinated and centralized measures to help stop irregular migration and prevent the increasing number of deaths at sea. This phenomenon cannot be stopped without considering its linkage to policy and socioeconomic conditions in the sending and receiving countries. Italy and Australia,⁵ in fact, have rarely used their diplomatic and economic power to directly address the causes of these flows. In many cases their actions have actually had the opposite effect, contributing to or even perpetuating the conditions that cause people to move.

Until now, political debate on this issue and the practices adopted by both governments were generally about preserving national security and ‘stopping the boats’, extraterritorial processing and repatriation, rather than about human rights and global responsibilities. Although ‘boat arrivals’ make up only a small proportion of ‘illegal’ immigrants in either country (Phillips, 2015; Blangiardo and Cesareo, 2013), the growing popular perception is of being ‘swamped’ by ‘irregular’ maritime arrivals. In addition, there is nowadays a perception that ethnicity and crime are connected, reinforced by a negative discourse about immigration (especially the issue of undocumented migrants and refugees). This concern, which takes the form of a ‘moral panic’, is exaggerated, as shown in a number of studies (e.g. Collins, 2007; de Haas and Sigona, 2012; Mares, 2011; Van Dijck, 2006), and the fear of crime is disproportionate to reality. This over-reaction in both Italy and Australia could be better described as continuance of ‘othering’ those who are different, and ethnic nationalism. This often leads to criminalizing entire communities and cultures, rather than mere individuals. That Italy and Australia increasingly penalize asylum-seekers entails a clear shift from ‘democracy’ to ‘security’ in a world of citizenships and circulation. Despite using wide discretionary power, they have not yet been able either to prevent the upsurge in ‘illegal immigration’ or to resolve its real causes.

The case of the ‘boat people’ has been placed within a wider historical perspective. Rendered visible from this perspective are long-term continuities between contemporary Italy

and Australia and the darkest pages of their national histories—the ‘Fascist’ and ‘White Australia’ eras, respectively. Although a clear attempt was made to forge a new national identity from their ashes, ‘imagined communities’ are political projects that do not emerge in a completely arbitrary way (Anderson, 2006). Through the use of a selective national narrative, many aspects of Romani and Aboriginal histories have not yet been officially recognized, signalling a trend to ‘whitewash’ all traces of an inconvenient past (Baldini *et al.*, 2003; Stanner, 2009). Given the persistent inequality affecting Romani and Aboriginal communities alike, members of certain minorities are touched by several discriminatory issues. This particularly involves African communities and people of Asian, Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds, refugees and asylum-seekers (CERD, 2010; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2012). In contemporary Italy and Australia, the rise of ethno-nationalism and legacies of past colonialism are now contributing to an institutional notion of supposed ‘Italianness’ and ‘Australianness’, clearly based on excluding the ‘other’ (Gummow, 2011; Jakubowicz, 2009; Merrill, 2014). The model of ‘ethnic democracy’ elaborated by Smootha (2009) is, thus, useful to describe both nations’ political systems.

Notes

¹ Our goal was not to verify or assess the effectiveness of immigration policies. We acknowledge the existence of a controversy around this issue. Some scholars have argued that states’ policies have been largely ineffective in curtailing migration. Others instead highlight the level of sophistication reached by migration policies, with visa requirements and stricter border controls being able to affect the magnitude and composition of immigration flows (see for instance the comprehensive study by Czaika and de Haas, 2013). This paper rather tries to link past authoritarian stances with contemporary anti-immigration policies.

² See Rhiannon Noel Welch’s (2016) book *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy* for a comprehensive contribution to our understanding of the Italian post-unification period (1861–1920). By putting under rigorous scrutiny the Liberal era, the author investigates the key role played by racial discourse and colonial endeavour in the definition of modern Italian identity. The notion of white ‘prestige’ was promoted well before Fascism officially embraced biological racism in 1935.

³ It is worth noting that the Italian culpability for the persecution of Jews also remains relatively unknown, and largely unacknowledged by Italians (Pavan as cited in Vitello, 2010). Yet, while the Jewish Holocaust is today highly recognized, the experience of the Romanies has remained on the periphery of genocide scholarship and is hardly ever analysed as a case of genocide in its own right (Armillei, Marczak, and Diamadis, 2016).

⁴ The Mare Nostrum Operation was a year-long naval and air operation launched by the Italian government due to the dramatic increase in migration flows in the Strait of Sicily.

⁵ It is worth mentioning the ‘migration compact’ proposed by the Italian government to the EU. Yet, the common debt issuance to fund the response to the refugee crisis proposed by former Renzi government has been repeatedly rejected by the German government (Barigazzi, 2016). At the moment, the lack of a truly European approach is thus impacting on the failure of the Italian government to address this issue (Armillei, 2017). As for the policies adopted by successive Australian governments towards asylum-seekers, these are based on deterrence with mutual commitment and cooperation with partners across

the Asia-Pacific region (UNICEF Australia, 2016).

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