

De Luca's Urban Populism: Migrations, Securitization and Post-Raciality in Messina (Italy)¹

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Abstract Despite the traditional narratives on the rise of populism, several scholars have recently underlined what is now called 'urban populism,' i.e. the relationships between medium or large cities and the spread of populism in contemporary societies. One of the major arguments that urban populism exploits to ensure its impressive growth is the presence of migrants in cities, especially when the latter are already on the verge of economic crises caused by health emergencies and international wars. Many European states have ambiguously wavered between the rejection of supranational entities and the desire to strengthen European borders, considered culturally homogeneous, against the 'threat' of foreigners arriving from Africa and Asia. Likewise, populism has been ambiguous with regard to cities, which are sometimes considered the receptacle for all evil, while at other times they are a political model (with obvious reference to the Greek *polis*) to be defended, once again, in the clash of civilizations that characterizes our era. If, in fact, there are many studies on the construction of the populist discourse at the national or supranational scale, less attention has been paid to the urban scale, which also plays a key role in the articulation between identity rhetoric, practices of confinement, and spatial imagery. In this turbulent context, Messina has also experienced some episodes, albeit not very well known, of populist anti-migrant rhetoric. Here, Mayor Cateno De Luca achieved regional and then national notoriety for his aggressive campaigns against both internal and external enemies. By building on the existing scientific literature on populism, and through the use of a qualitative methodology based on critical discourse analysis, this contribution aims to outline the links between migration and urban populism, starting from a theoretical framework and then describing the specific case of De Luca's narratives about the *Gasparro* reception center in Messina and its contested geographies.

¹ Although the article should be considered a result of the common work and reflection of the two authors, Marco Picone took primary responsibility for sections 1 and 2, while Chiara Giubilaro took primary responsibility for sections 3 and 4.

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1. Introduction

This chapter builds upon the most recent scholarly debate on urban populism and its relationships with migrations. By drawing upon existing academic literature on populism, our goal is to show how migrants become a key argument of the populist discourse, along with the defense of ‘the people’ from foreigners. Several scholars have already unveiled the strategies enforcing how populism describes and exploits migrants for its own goals (Kallis 2018; Brubaker 2020), but in this chapter, we will focus on the urban scale, as we believe the city, especially in a time of pandemics, is willingly chosen as a stage where fear and security are employed and performed to better direct the political choices of the voting population (Smith 2004; Wacquant 2014; Lizotte 2020).

In Section 2 we will introduce the theoretical framework which will serve as the basis for the analysis of our case study from Messina, described in Section 3. In Messina, local populist politicians have recently enacted their own policies, which strongly oppose an ethical and inclusive point of view of migrants. The case we are presenting in this chapter employs a qualitative methodology based on critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Wodak and Meyer 2009) and aims at unveiling the rhetorical strategies populists employ to discredit migrants and use their precariousness for their own political profit. Section 4 presents the results of our research, by discussing how populisms and migrants become key figures in contemporary regimes of post-raciality, as critical scholars pointed out (Goldberg 2015; Ghebremariam Tesfau’ and Picker 2021).

2. All the Way Back to Russia

Populism, as we know it today, was born in Russia. Its origins lie within the Russian *narodnism* movement of the late 19th century (Nahirny 2018). The term *narod* means ‘people, folk’, but the relationships between the Russian *intelligentsia* and the *narod* are complicated: it was the ‘thinking individuals’ (the *intelligentsia*) that defined the role of the ‘uncivilized, uneducated crowd’—the *narod*, the true agents of *populism*. Populism was the product of what the elites believed common folk should do and think.

The relationship between the people and the elites has significantly shifted over the latest decades. Whereas Russian elites were patronizing the *narod*, today populism can be defined as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté*

générale (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543). In this form of populism, the reference to corrupt elites “means that populism is a form of *moral* politics, as the distinction between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ is first and foremost moral (i.e. pure vs. corrupt), not situational (e.g. position of power), socio-cultural (e.g. ethnicity, religion), or socio-economic (e.g. class)” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, 8).

More recently, a new form of populism began to emerge. This new form is called ‘nationalist populism’ and focuses on nations as well as people (Casaglia and Coletti 2020, 1). Nationalist populism is now spreading all over Europe and the Americas, though “a sharp distinction between populism and nationalism misses the ambiguity and ambivalence that are internal to populist discourse” (Brubaker 2020, 61).

What seems particularly interesting as we write today, almost a year after the start of the war in Ukraine, is that over the last few years populism seems to be back to its cradle. As the war between Russia and Ukraine proceeds, propaganda and populism are key tools for gaining consensus. This holds true for Russia and its president Vladimir Putin⁴, but also for Ukraine and Volodymyr Zelenskyy⁵ (Baysa 2022). The hugely influential TV series *Servant of the People*, whose main character is played by Zelenskyy himself, tells the story of a humble college teacher who later unexpectedly becomes the President of Ukraine. This TV series is a powerful example of populist discourses in Ukraine and can be interpreted through the lenses of popular geopolitics (Dittmer and Bos 2019; Makarychev 2022).

There is an intimate relationship between populism, Russia and some right-wing Italian political parties, most notably the *Lega*, which have recently won the national elections in September 2022. Before the beginning of the Ukrainian war, several right-wing leaders, such as Matteo Salvini, expressed their sympathy for Russia and its government (fig. 1): “admiration of Putin’s regime in Italy can most effectively be conceptualized through the prism of popular geopolitics, as an oversimplified and superficial vision of the world where political reasoning is reduced to illusory and manipulative imageries representing a mix of nostalgia [...], fantasies, conspiracies, and a peculiar postcolonial imagination” (Makarychev and Terry 2020, 26). In a sense, we might argue that Russian populism got back home (or maybe never left its home in Russia), but it certainly visited Italy as well.

⁴ Scholars are debating Putin’s identification as a populist leader. However, according to Tina Burrett (2020, 196), “Putin may not be a populist in all aspects of his leadership, but this does not mean that certain populist elements are not part of his repertoire.” For what concerns the main argument of this chapter, therefore, we believe that Putin can be considered a populist leader, albeit with some degree of caution.

⁵ Throughout this chapter we decided to use the transliteration ‘Zelenskyy’ to address the Ukrainian president, though other sources use ‘Zelensky’ or ‘Zelenskiy.’



Fig. 1 Caricature representing a kiss between Salvini and Putin, in Modena (Italy) (Source [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Matteo_Salvini_-_Vladimir_Putin_\(MO\)_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Matteo_Salvini_-_Vladimir_Putin_(MO)_(cropped).jpg), accessed 25 November 2022).

Naturally, this Italian version of populism is not the same as its Russian counterpart. For starters, the traditional populist opposition between the elite and the people “hardly works within the Italian polity since Salvini the populist is an inherent part of the elite, not its opposite” (Makarychev and Terry 2020, 25). However, many elements still concur to connect Russian and Italian populisms.

2.1 The Perfect Populist Leader

One of the most significant above-mentioned elements is how a populist leader is defined and what characteristics should such a leader possess. Building upon Max Weber’s (1978) concept of *charisma*, Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell state that populist leaders “‘incarnate the people’s culture’, articulate the will of the people, ‘say what people are thinking’, can see through the machinations of the

elites and have the vision to provide simple, understandable solutions to the problems portrayed by the elites as complex and intractable. However, while blessed with qualities which are far beyond the norm, these leaders have remained in all other ways ‘one of the people’ and, hence, one ‘with the people’” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 7).

There are several Italian political leaders whose characteristics match the description above. The most well-known cases are certainly Silvio Berlusconi and his idea of ‘the common man’ and the two leaders of the *Lega*, Umberto Bossi and, later, Matteo Salvini, along with their ‘identity populism’ (Tarchi 2008). Others, however, are vying for the scepter and perhaps the most interesting case is the rise to power of Giorgia Meloni’s *Fratelli d’Italia*. In the following sections, we will focus on Cateno De Luca, a local Sicilian politician whose astonishingly growing consensus is due to populist rhetoric (Saitta 2020). Italian sociologist Pietro Saitta, as we will discuss below, in his works on Sicilian populism, went so far as to call De Luca a “diabolical” populist (Saitta 2020, 128) because of how he constantly identifies new ‘enemies’ to condemn and new scapegoats to blame.

Social scientists (Davis 1999; Agamben 2003; Wacquant 2007) have built on Bauman’s (2006) insight and focused on how fear has been used and spatialized, particularly after 9/11 and the terrorist threats to the United States. We will get back to this point at the end of this article, after a discussion on what has happened in Messina over the last months. What matters for now is that this approach to fear and security is defining nationalist populism as a movement aiming to defend national communities from the forces of globalization (Gordon 2018).

In this struggle between (good) nations and (evil) globalization lies one of the most striking paradoxes concerning populism: the same political elites whose agendas are inspired by globalizing trends and interests become the leaders of populist parties and movements across the world, as is the case for France (Marine Le Pen’s *Rassemblement National*, previously called *Front National*), the United Kingdom (Nigel Farage’s *UKIP*, the largest and most vocal nationalist populist party in the European Parliament), Hungary (Viktor Orbán’s *Fidesz*) and Italy (Matteo Salvini’s *Lega*), amongst other European countries. Moreover, these political leaders often look for international alliances that could help them face the ‘European elites’ and their “there-is-no-alternative-to-the-EU mindset” (Mamadouh 2020, 6), while at the same time claiming an increasingly stronger role in the very same European Parliament they are trying to dismantle. Instead of dismantling supranational entities, it seems like populist parties are now trying to change those entities from the inside. Whether they will succeed or not remains to be seen.

2.2 Walls and Migrants: Populism Comes to Town

Along with slogans such as reclaiming the nation from the corrupt elites and defending national interests from globalization, populisms often employ the

concept of walls to counter migration flows and restrict asylum policies. The most relevant example of these policies is perhaps the ‘Trump wall’ on the US–Mexican border (dell’Agnese 2005; Casey and Watkins 2014; Boyce 2016; Becker 2021; fig. 2). The wall has also recently appeared in the docuseries *Immigration Nation*, which was broadcast on Netflix starting from August 2020 (Guardian 2020).



Fig. 2 Mexico–United States barrier at the border of Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, USA. The crosses represent migrants who died in the crossing attempt (Source https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Border_Wall_at_Tijuana_and_San_Diego_Border.jpg, accessed 29 November 2022).

The wall—both as border and as barrier—is a *cliché* that right-wing populisms constantly refer to: “The idea of the border is basic to the populist aspiration for remaking space in the image of the people. [...] For far-right populists, the degrading effects of multiculturalism and immigration provide natural fault lines between us and them, the treasured and the expendable, the depraved city and the virtuous countryside. At every turn, far-right populists see the undermining of national pride by the machinations of outsiders and the imminent pollution of European space by non-European invaders” (Lizotte 2020, 3).

Christopher Lizotte also points out another relevant aspect of the ambiguous attitude of populisms: their view of what the city represents. Although the main focus for its discourse is the nation, cities also became crucial in the populist *weltanschauung*. “Nazi, Fascist, and Communist regimes all held the city in ambiguous regard: as a symbol of decadence, national decline or depravity on the one hand, and of potential renewal on the other, where rationality, monumentality, and a modern aesthetic could sweep away the past. Today, [...] the city still serves as a convenient reference point for populist demagogues and partisans” (*ibidem*). Within the framework of this ambiguous positioning, the case study we are discussing here will provide insight into how cities have become the ground for the concrete realization of populist policies and discourses. In the populist point of view, cities must be defended from the migrant threats, just like nations. Being traditionally more progressive than non-urban areas, cities also become an especially important battleground for right-wing populist parties, as they try to point out how left-wing inclusive policies towards migrants can endanger the city and leave it unprepared

to deal with all the threats migrants can pose. The example of what happened in Messina will shed light on these dynamics.

3. Reframing postraciality at the urban scale. The Case of the “Gasparro” center in Messina

On August 26, 2018, 148 people on board the Italian Coast Guard ship *Diciotti* were allowed to disembark in Messina, the third largest city in Sicily (Italy). They had been rescued from an overcrowded boat off the island of Lampedusa on August 16, but Italian far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini had denied the authorization to disembark for several days, leaving the people on board stuck in a state of indefinite detention (Butler 2006, 50–51), amidst voices of dissent and protest campaigns⁶. Once disembarked, people on board the *Diciotti* were transferred to the *Gasparro* hotspot in Messina, former military barracks in the Bisconte neighborhood. When a local journalist approached Messina’s newly elected mayor Cateno De Luca to ask him for feedback on the Italian Interior Ministry decision, he gave an answer that provides a useful starting point for exploring urban populism: “The migrants? I will give them the slums⁷, those slums where 10,000 Messina residents currently live amid asbestos, open sewers, and filth. Will someone accuse me of racism? First, they will have to explain to me why an Italian [citizen] can live in those dilapidated buildings, but a migrant cannot [...] I have 10,000 people that have been living in slums for 110 years. Messina was the least suitable city for a hotspot”⁸. Although De Luca was not new to provocations, his comment on the *Diciotti* case sets the stage for exploring how right-wing populism is renegotiated at the urban scale and what is the role of migration and raciality in it.

Research on the so-called *Diciotti crisis* has been mostly restricted to the national (Carbone 2019; Frazzetta and Piazza 2021) and international scale (Filmer 2020). Although some authors have investigated how the *Diciotti crisis* has been framed across different media, languages, and narratives, such approaches have tended to overlook the role of urban practices and discourses in framing this event. As discussed above, scholarship on populism and racism is mostly concerned with the nation-state and, more recently, with international actors and relations. What we

⁶ Matteo Salvini was formally prosecuted over abuse of office and illegal detention, but on February 19, 2019, the Italian Senate voted to block the investigation into his accusations of kidnapping.

⁷ After the 1908 earthquake devastated Messina and resulted in the death of at least 65,000 of its inhabitants, the local authorities decided to build around 7,600 temporary shelters that in spite of a long and complex history of urban development became a “permanent feature of the urban landscape”, raising a still open social question investigated by Saitta and Farinella in their book *The Endless Reconstruction and Social Disasters* (Farinella and Saitta 2018).

⁸ Facebook post on Cateno De Luca’s page, 27 August 2018, accessed 17 December 2022.

would like to argue is that a rescaling of these analyses is needed to understand the key role that urban spaces and actors play nowadays in articulating populist rhetorics. To do so, we want to explicitly adopt a spatial approach to populism, by focusing on a peculiar space and its contested geographies. Due to its location in a highly marginalized neighborhood and its immediate proximity to one of the post-earthquake slums in the city, the former military barracks *Gasparro* were and still are a battleground where different imaginaries coexist, overlap, and conflict. From this vantage point, we analyze some of the discourses and images that have distinguished De Luca's rhetoric on Bisconte from 2018 to 2020. For this purpose, we adopt a mixed methodology that combines visual content and critical discourse analysis (Rose 2001; Wodak and Meyer 2009).

Elected Mayor of Messina in June 2018, De Luca quickly achieved regional and then national notoriety for his aggressive and racist campaigns against "the smart and the uncivilized ones" ("i furbi e gli incivili"). He then created his own political party (Sud Chiama Nord 2022) and ran for President of Sicily at the regional elections of September 2022. Despite his initially relative political strength, De Luca came second with a final result of 23.95% (Regione Siciliana 2022), beating other more structured and well-established parties like the *Partito Democratico* (16.17%) and *Movimento 5 Stelle* (15.22%). In his seminal study of Cateno De Luca's neo-populism, Saitta provides a reconstruction of De Luca's phenomenology through a detailed analysis of his public discourses (Saitta 2020). Bringing together the "Southern question" debate and the Foucaultian reflection on pastoral power, Saitta rereads the urban civilization project enacted by De Luca and carefully examines its discursive strategies and diversified objectives. De Luca's neo-populism feeds on the everyday identification of a wide range of enemies, such as uncivilized people, inefficient municipal employees, national and regional politicians, and whoever might threaten the urban community and its social order. What characterizes and differentiates De Luca's populism, in Saitta's view, is that internal enemies play a major role in his narratives than external enemies (Saitta 2020, 146). Although this interpretation of De Luca's urban populism is to a certain extent correct, it risks failing to address how migrants and asylum seekers contribute to forging De Luca's imageries, strategies, and practices.

To fill this gap, in this section we provide some insights into the ways the Mayor of Messina reframes and expands the repertoires of representation used to mark racial difference in right-wing populist discourse. What we would like to argue is that to fully understand De Luca's narratives on migrants we need to inscribe them within a post-racial theoretical framework. Primarily theorized in the United States (Goldberg 2015; St Louis 2015) and then introduced in the European debate by Salman Sayyid (Sayyid 2017), the term post-raciality is used to describe a particular, self-deceptive configuration of racism that, far from dismissing race, "actively erases not only the relevance of race, but the very possibility of naming facts, organizational logics, official discourses and circumstances as racist" (Ghebremariam Tesfau' and Picker 2021, 3). In the post-racist age, racism is rarely mentioned, but it silently operates in ways and places that are formally disconnected

from its structures of violence and mostly reported to occasional individual actions. This mechanism is particularly significant when we look at the Italian case, where racial inequalities are often depoliticized and disconnected from structural responsibilities and their socio-cultural matrices (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2005). As Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau' and Giovanni Picker have persuasively argued (Ghebremariam Tesfau' and Picker 2021), empirical analyses on Italian populism and its relationships with racial injustice are key to building up a post-racial archive that shapes and organizes a history and theory of racism in Italy (Ghebremariam Tesfau' and Picker 2021, 14). In support of this argument, we now examine the issues at stake through a critical analysis of De Luca's discourses on what happened in and around the *Gasparro* center between 2018 and 2020.



Fig. 3 A satellite view of “Gasparro” Center and the post-earthquake slum in Bisconte, Messina (Source iMaps).

Converted into First Reception Center (*Centro di Prima Accoglienza*) in 2013 and then into a hotspot in 2017, the former military barracks *Gasparro* in Bisconte were and still are a terrain of political struggle and discursive debate. As we mentioned at the beginning of this section, the transfer of people onboard the *Diciotti* to the newly established hotspot in Bisconte in August 2018 signaled the beginning of a long series of performances that have contributed to constructing De Luca's populist rhetoric. Located a few steps away from the post-earthquake Bisconte barracks (fig. 3), the center has always been the target of post-racist acts and discourses. Its spatial proximity with one of the most marginalized areas in the city transformed it into a perfect stage for performing acts of bordering, aimed at

spatializing difference and thereby tracing a line of demarcation between ‘us’, the people of Messina, and ‘them’, the potentially dangerous migrants. This line of demarcation is precisely what sustains De Luca’s provocative statement of relocating migrants in the barracks (see above). As in many other occasions, De Luca takes explicitly into account the accusation of racism (“someone will accuse me of racism”), deploying a rhetorical strategy aimed at silencing the racial charge and affirming that racism is a matter of subjective interpretation and judgment. Moreover, the vulnerability experienced by those living in slums becomes a practical resource to be exploited in defining lines of political opposition between “the people” and “the others” (Brubaker 2020).

A similar performance took place six months later when 47 people rescued by German NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 3* were transferred to the Bisconte hotspot after twelve days of loitering at sea. Interviewed by a local blog journalist, Cateno De Luca stated: “Racism has nothing to do with it. Messina is in such a condition that it is the least suitable city to welcome these people. A city in which the dignity of so many Messina residents is mortified and humiliated”⁹. Once again, racism is thoroughly rejected and delinked from the event and its narration. But it was during the summer of 2020 that De Luca’s political battle against the *Gasparro* center reached its peak. After some groups of migrants fled from the center and voices of dissent were raised by slum residents in Bisconte, Cateno De Luca mounted a legal case against the Prefecture of Messina and the Italian Interior Ministry for the damages caused by the facility, aimed at closing both the hotspot and the Extraordinary Reception Center (*Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria*). On August 10, 2020, De Luca attended a sit-in protest against the center organized by the residents¹⁰. After listening to residents’ complaints about migrants allegedly breaking into their homes (“Mr. Mayor, I found a Tunisian man inside my house!”), De Luca asked for a microphone and delivered a long and passionate speech: “Gentlemen, I am here with you. [...] We are all on the same side. You are right about taking a stand, I apologize if I get pissed off too, but we all have problems. Now, police have to strengthen their surveillance. I will be here with you on the 23rd. If they don’t leave on the 23rd, let’s occupy the Prefecture and they must arrest all of us”¹¹. Mobilizing a classical *topos* of populist rhetorics, De Luca positioned himself within the urban community (“I am here with you”, “we are all on the same side”): he was not just *with* the people, he *was* the people. Moreover, to echo Brubaker’s argument (2020), both vertical opposition to those on top (the Prefecture) and horizontal opposition to outside groups (the migrants) are at play in

⁹ http://www.strettoweb.com/foto/2019/01/migranti-sea-watch-messina-de-luca/799455/?fbclid=IwAR2xsw9qj4uJeiyO4QD7XXYKk_hu8DAB9vtCdOu_Ai6O5Bjbn_K-GIGNFBU (accessed 17 December 2022).

¹⁰ These urban performances are always accompanied by a wide range of photos and videos posted on De Luca’s Facebook profile.

¹¹ Video posted on Cateno De Luca’s Facebook page, 10 August 2020, accessed 17 December 2022.

his speech, confirming their empirical intertwining in populist discourse. The second issue at stake has to do with the securitization discourse. According to De Luca, the political response to popular discontent is to strengthen police surveillance. This insistence on law enforcement is a recurrent feature of De Luca's narratives and it is supported by a precise politics of fear: "Migrants break into private homes, scaring people and endangering my community". The community is threatened by an external enemy and its leader must protect and preserve it. Indeed, the alleged need to reinforce police surveillance implicitly constructs a discursive framework where the *Gasparro* center becomes the source of a frightening threat requiring unprecedented drastic measures. The spatial imagery sustaining De Luca's discourse is a kind of inverted fortress. The boundaries of the center need to be militarized to protect not those living inside, but conversely people outside. The threat comes from an internal space, not from a frightening elsewhere. Fear has a key role in the reproduction of this spatial imagery, recalling what Cindi Katz has identified as banal terrorism: "Banal terrorism produces a sense of terror and fear in a drivel and everyday way. [...] The material social practices of banal terrorism work at all scales and their intricate circuitry not only enables them to authorize and reinforce one another but naturalizes their acceptability and seeming common sense" (Katz 2007, 350–351). Everyday populism circulates, reproduces, and strengthens itself through a series of discourses and practices normalizing fear and the responses to it across different geographic scales.

The contested geographies of the Bisconte neighborhood are perfectly staged in a video posted by Catenò De Luca in his Facebook page right after the closure of the Extraordinary Reception Center on August 28 (fig. 4). During the first few minutes of the video, we watch the closed gate of the center, then the hand-held camera moves slowly, focusing on the decaying shacks across the street, the mud all around, and the cracks in the walls. The Bisconte urban landscape is sharply divided into two separate areas and communities: the slum neighborhood vs. the center, us vs. them. After this five-minute urban prologue, De Luca arrives on the scene and tells the story of the center, pinpointing and commenting on its key moments: "The community of Bisconte reacted against this facility not out of racism—and I want to emphasize this because I do not accept that the residents of Bisconte are accused of being racist. The residents of Bisconte were pissed off because their homes were literally invaded by migrants. And I would like to see you in their shoes". The post-racial regime is operating. According to De Luca, racism has nothing to do with what has been happening in Bisconte ("I do not accept that the residents of Bisconte are accused of being racist"). Still, individuals or small groups escaping the center become, in De Luca's narrative, a "proper invasion", thus performing one of the most salient features of right-wing populist discourse on migration. In parallel with this securitarian narrative, the humanitarian logic is also in operation: "How did you ensure COVID regulations inside these facilities? Or you don't care because they are black?". As it often happens in populist rhetoric, two different but strongly interrelated representations are tightly intertwined: the humanitarian spectacle of protection and the securitarian spectacle of invasion (Cuttitta 2015). In De Luca's

public discourse, migrants are not just a threat to others, but also people exploited for political interests (“stop migrants’ trade”)¹² or victims of shameful national and regional migration policies (“I call for a safe reception system”, “who is in charge of this carnage must resign”)¹³. In this sense, the spread of coronavirus opened up new possibilities for re-articulating his populist rhetoric and its spatial imaginations. The ‘invisible enemy’ puts both the individual and the social body in danger, therefore justifying policies of constant control and containment.



Fig. 4 Cateno De Luca in a frame from the “Stop migrants in Bisconte!” video posted on Facebook on August 28, 2020 (Source Cateno De Luca’s Facebook page, accessed 17 December 2022).

In this section, we have sought to demonstrate that the urban scale also represents a crucial stage for identitarian claims and xenophobic anxieties. As Neil Smith argued: “Cities and states are not supposed to have their own foreign policy, presumably the prerogative of national states. [...] [T]hese events suggest intense ‘scale bending’ in the contemporary political and social economy. Entrenched assumptions about what kinds of social activities fit properly at which scales are being systematically challenged and upset” (Smith 2004, 193). The case of the *Gasparro* reception center signals the downscaling of the populist repertoire: the invocation of ‘the people’ and the need to protect it from a frightening ‘other’, the mobilization of fear and the militarization of everyday life, invasion threats, exclusionary practices and security obsessions. Events like those we discussed here demonstrate the ability of populist rhetoric to operate within every scenario and at

¹² Facebook post on Cateno De Luca’s page, 18 July 2020, accessed 17 December 2022.

¹³ Facebook post on Cateno De Luca’s page, 24 August 2020, accessed 17 December 2022.

every scale. By reshaping its discursive strategies and adapting its spatial imageries, populism ceaselessly whips up fear and builds up walls, from the microscale of the body to the global scale of the pandemic.

4. Spatializing Urban Fear

In her work on the social and political constructions of emotions, Sarah Ahmed has argued: “[F]ear works to align bodily and social space: it works to enable bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained. [...] It is the regulation of bodies in space through the uneven distribution of fear which allows spaces to become territories, claimed as rights by some bodies and not others” (Ahmed 2004, 76). As with many other emotions like hate, shame, disgust or love, fear can also work as a political tool for governing bodies and their mobility across space. Mobilizing the fear of being threatened or hurt by the actual or potential proximity of others means determining who can freely move and who must be confined to preserve the imperatives of security and protection. The language of fear establishes a distance between bodies; to secure this distance, it needs to spatialize it through boundaries, walls, and barriers. This spatial politics of fear lies in a perception of shared risk, which is subtly constructed through a routinized set of images, discourses, and practices we intended to reflect on in this contribution.

If this bordering process driven by fear and anxiety operates at every scale, it is within the urban realm that it finds a particularly fertile ground. Here, populism can and does articulate discourses and policies that combine together collective fears, security obsessions, and purified notions of identity. Additionally, the higher concentration of migrants and the major changes taking place in medium- and large-sized cities make them a crucial site for building political consensus. The plans to build a mosque, the presence of religious symbols at school and stigmatized neighborhoods and communities have been increasingly transformed into a battlefield of representations, ideas, and policies. The case of the *Gasparro* center in Biscontè demonstrates how the pandemic may provide a basis for populism to rearticulate its claims and reframe the role of space in this process. After the decision to transfer people onboard the *Diciotti* there, the center became a discursive site through which De Luca’s populist politics was produced and circulated. By critically analyzing some of his declarations about these events, we aimed at highlighting the nexus between populist discourses, post-racial politics, and bordering practices at the urban scale. The imperative of security was reflected in the internal organization of urban space, reshaping its divisions and exclusions.

The present contribution provides insight into the relationship between populism, fear, and urban space. Although many scholars in the fields of geography and social sciences have been inquiring in the spatial dimension of the rise of populisms across Europe and North America, there could be more extensive consideration of the

decisive role of urban space in the production of populist discourses and actions. Moreover, future research should not underestimate the immaterial aspects of populist geographies, focusing on how discursive and visual rhetorics contribute to shaping the populist imagination and its spatial dimension. In reifying both the health threat and the us-versus-them divisions, space provides an incredibly influential arena in which contemporary populism can stage its performances of exclusive nationalism and identity politics.

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