foreignness

by Paola Giorgis

Abstract:

Italiano. *Questa voce esamina la parola 'foreignness' (estraneità) seguendo due linee principali, la **liminalità**, cioè la condizione di sospensione tra due stati, e la **prospettiva**, ovvero sia la posizione da cui si guarda. Mentre in molte narrazioni contemporanee la parola viene mobilizzata per definire una **condizione statica** ('essere straniera/o', 'essere fuori da'), l'etimologia della parola* - foris - *rimanda invece a una **condizione** più **dinamica**, un 'essere su una soglia, su un margine', uno spazio di mutevolezza e cambiamento. Allo stesso tempo, il concetto di **prospettiva** fornisce un ulteriore elemento di dinamicità al concetto di estraneità, in quanto consente di problematizzare la **posizione di chi guarda e nomina** in relazione alla **posizione di chi è guardata/o e nominata/o,** definendo quindi lo **'sguardo'** come uno spazio politico che rivela **asimmetrie di potere**. Il termine 'estraneità' viene qui analizzato partendo da una **riflessione storica** di come le/gli Italiani-come-stranieri venivano percepiti e rappresentati nei discorsi di fine Ottocento-primi del Novecento negli Stati Uniti e, ancora, a metà del Novecento in paesi come Germania, Belgio e Svizzera. A queste narrazioni viene affiancato il **discorso contemporaneo** sulle nuove 'estraneità' in Italia, mostrando come, cambiando i (sog)oggetti del discorso, ritornino gli stessi stereotipi e le stesse discriminazioni, e rivelando quindi come il concetto di estraneità sia determinato da fattori storici, politici, e socio-culturali. Questa analisi si avvale della mirabile lezione sulla prospettiva di **Jonathan Swift** ne "I Viaggi di Gulliver", e di **studi decoloniali** che hanno mostrato l'altra faccia dell'estraneità, quella violenta e sopraffattrice del colonialismo.*

This entry examines the word 'foreignness' following two main lines, that of **liminality** and that of **perspective**. Both constructs allow us to foreground how foreigness is a **dynamic concept** determined by socio-cultural, political, historical and economic factors, thus problematizing the position of those **who look at** and those **who are looked at**, and defining the '**gaze**' as a political site that manifests **asymmetrical status of power**.

Etymology:

Foreignness: from the Latin *fŏris* (f. noun) = door – of a room, a temple and, in a figurative sense, entrance, passage, access; and *fŏrīs* (adv. and prep.) = from the outside; outside.

(OED-Oxford English Dictionary)

Problematization:

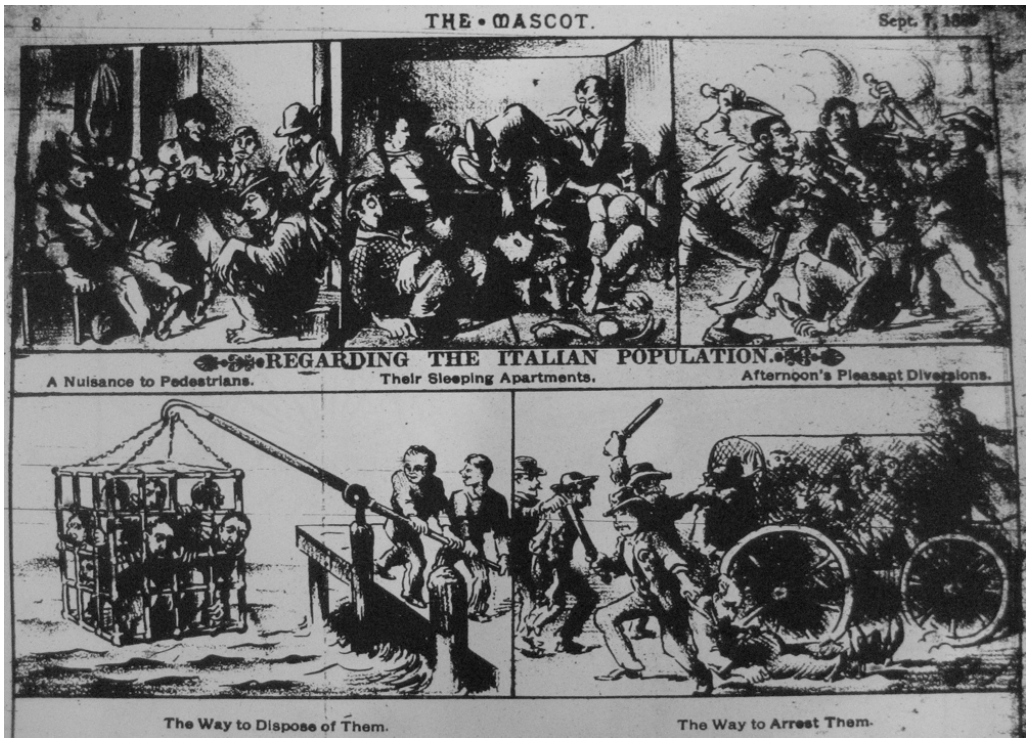
The root of '**foreign**' indicates **the spatial quality** of something or someone who is or comes from out of doors, from the outside. Yet, the same root also refers to a **liminal space** [threshold, space of transition]: in Latin, *fŏris* means 'door', a spatial element which separates, but also connects what/who is 'in' and what/who is 'out'. Therefore, the original root of the word does not refer to a static condition, but rather to a dynamic one.

Though it has come to define what is in and what is out, foreignness actually relates to a liminal quality, the concept of 'door' that is in its root. The **concept of liminality** points out to the core question that lies inside the term: **who has the power to define 'foreignness**' – and the 'foreigner' – as such? Deciding who and what is in and what is out is a **matter of perspective** - which is, indeed, **an issue of power**.

Communication strategies:

"These **foreigners** are ... **undesirable**", "of the lowest order", "**savage**", "treacherous", "i**nnate criminals**", "a pest without mitigation", "as good citizens as our rattlesnakes", "a **menace**", "naturally **prone to deliquency** and **murder**". They "**lack mental ability**", "**do no keep their places clean**", "**do not belong here**", "bring the district into disrepute".

This is how **Italian immigrants** – particularly those from Southern Italy – were depicted in the North-american newspapers and public discourse in the late 19th and early 20th century. Such a narrative was often reinforced by vignettes and cartoons, such as this one appeared in *The Mascot*, New Orleans, Sept. 7th, 1888, which illustrates the three main stereotyped features of Italians (they are idle and create nuisance in the streets; they live in overcrowded flats with no hygene; they indulge in violence and riots) and how authorities should deal with them (expulsion - by drowning? - and imprisonment):



On the grounds of their foreignness, in the US Italians were refused jobs or flats; admission to shops, restaurants or theatres; they were segregated and, in several cases, lynched by angry mobs.

With the exclusion of lynching (yet, not of violent physical assaults), a similar pattern of discrimination occurred in other parts of Europe such as in Germany, France, Switzerland and Belgium. This is a 1950s sign in a Belgian café:

(Entry forbidden to dogs and Italians)

The example of 'Italians-as-foreigners' discussed above can be taken as a relevant case to see how the **notion of foreignness can** radically **change** in a short time. In fact, In less than a century – and in some cases, in few decades – 'Italian foreignness' has been radically redefined. From the **social outcasts** depicted above, the Italians have become, '*unsere meisten geliebt Fremden*' or '*unsere Lieblingsausländer'* (**our most beloved foreigners**), as they are now for example seen in Switzerland, both in the eyes of public opinion and in the media (e.g., www.annabelle.ch).

So, what has changed in a few years?

Jonathan Swift's **lesson on perspective** is very useful and relevant to understand the dynamics of such a conversion.

Subversion:

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift was published in 1726. The book is the world-famous narrative of Lemuel Gulliver's adventures and misadventures in imagined countries. By putting his rather gullible protagonist in the most improbable and uncomfortable situations in far-off countries, Swift ironically and sometimes ferociously exposes the contradictions and the corruption of our societies, the arrogance of power, the pretentiousness of human vanity, and the petty greed of individuals. For its multilayered levels of reading, the work has equally amused children and adults throughout the centuries, and has inspired innumerable literary, artistic, and film productions.

Beyond its literary merits and the socio-political critique it advances, Swift's novel is a true goldmine to acknowledge and problematize **the mechanisms which favor the (re) production of foreignness** (Giorgis 2018). To do so, Swift plays a witty card, that of the perspective. **The perspective** is the position from which we look at ourselves and others; it is what **frames and defines our vision of reality** and the **meaning** we give to it. In the different adventures he narrates, Swift always changes his protagonist's scale (Gulliver is too big or too small) or status (as in the society of horses), obliging him to constantly readjust his perspective – and, at the same time, forcing us to readjust ours. The constant change of perspective makes us reflect how **the smallest shift in the point of observation** leads us to see and consider **things differently.**

Yet, **the point of observation does not come naturally**. The place and the position from which ***we look at*** things is determined by historical, geographical, socio-cultural, and economic factors. And the same factors determine the place and the position from which ***we are looked at.***

The heart of the matter is indeed: ***who looks at***, and ***who is looked at*** – who has the power and the privilege to look at, and who is in the subordinate position of being looked at. The **gaze** is a political site which manifests **asymmetrical status of power**.

The example of Italians discussed above shows how **foreignness** is a notion which is **historically situated** and **socio-culturally constructed,** and how far it is strictly connected to factors such as **class** and **race**. Not only the **Italian immigrants** belonged to the lower classes, but they were also culturally perceived - and constructed - as **racially different** (Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003; Staples 2019).

Now, let's move the perspective **from the outside to within**.

As part of a **larger historica**l and **social phenomenon**, from being traditionally **a land of emigration** in the last decades **Italy** has become **a land of immigration**. Such historical, social, and anthropological change has impacted on how Italians look at themselves and others: to Italians, **foreignness** has become something that regards **the others**.

The 2019 **Report** on the **Political Hate Speech** in **Italy** has analyzed three major categories of inquiry (political statements, promotion of local self-organized events, and posts on the social media) to define the **five main recurring topoi** [commonplaces] which are disseminated against undesired foreigners, the immigrants: they **invade** the country, they **cost** too much, they are **criminals**, they obtain **privileges** which are denied to Italians, they cause an **ethnic replacement**.

The **Report** lists some **declarations** made by politicians from **right-wings parties**: "*Dobbiamo decidere se la nostra etnia, la nostra razza bianca, la nostra società deve continuare a esistere o deve essere cancellata*" [We must decide whether our ethnicity, **our white race**, our society must continue or must be cancelled]; "*Siamo sotto attacco*, *sono a rischio la nostra cultura, società, tradizioni, modo di vivere*. (..) *E' in corso un'invasione*" [We are under **attack**, our culture, our society, traditions, way of life are at risk (…). An **invasion** is currently underway]; "*Non vogliamo vedere cose colorate in giro in città*" [We don't want to see **coloured things** around in town]. To reinforce such enouncements, the slogan "*Prima gli Italiani*" (Italians first) on- and off-line intensifies **polarized positions** Us versus Them.

The same **Report** remaks how on the social media **tones** get very **violent**: "*Ne***acci con le nike e le trippe piene*"[Ni***ers with nikes and full bellies], "*Dovrebbero essere annegati al largo*" [They should be drowned off the shores], "*Seccateli al primo colpo: sono mille euro a testa*"[Kill them on the first shot: one thousand euro each].

As we can see, the **targeted foreigners** change, but the stereotypes associated to them, and the epithets used against them, do not vary much. Even the procedures that are urged to be enforced are very similar: expulsion, imprisonment – or radical elimination.

Yet, Swift's lesson on perspective offers us **another viewpoint** to look at foreignness, imparting a **radical shift** in our discussion on **how foreignness** can be **conceptualized** and **experienced**.

Foreigners can *really* **invade** a country; they can *really* make a **cultural, linguistic,** and **ethnic replacement**; they can *really* **exploit** the country's resources and **impoverish** its economy. These foreigners are the **colonial invaders**.

Speaking about the passion that after anti-colonial struggles in Egypt (1952) and Algeria (1962) brought to the vindication of educational territory, **Edward Said** (2000) says: "… it is equally important to understand the tremendous spiritual **wound** felt by many of us because of the sustained presence in our midst of **domineering foreigners** who taught us to respect distant norms and values more than our own. **Our culture** was felt to be of a **lower grade**, perhaps even congenitally inferior and something of which to be ashamed" (p. 371).

Here, the foreigners are "domineering foreigners": again, Swift's lesson on **perspective** is a lesson on **power**.

Franz Fanon (1961/2004) argues that power enacted through violence is inherent to colonialism. He speaks of "**coercive physical power**" ("In the colonies the **foreigner** imposed himself using his cannons and machines", p. 5) that controls the **bodies** and **souls** of the colonized, dehumanizing them; of i**nstitutional violence**, established through political, educational, judicial institutions; and of **epistemic violence**, that, by stating which knowledge, language, culture, values, social configuration, economic system are legitimate, authorizes processes of domination.

And it should come as no surprise that, in *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift's **lesson on perspective and power** ends precisely with a stark description of colonialism:

> *Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by Divine Right. Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, their Princes tortured to discover their Gold; a free Licence given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: and this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a modern Colony sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People* (p. 269).

Discussion:

"*Foreign*, adj.: belonging to another and inferior country"

(Ambrose Bierce)

Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary,* first published in 1906, contains cynical and irriverent definitions of common words. It is a bitter satire of right-thinking societies, unveiling the hypocrisy that hides under the comfortable blanket of respectability.

His bitter definition of 'foreign' is a good point to widen the discussion.

- How would you define 'foreign'?
- How do you conceptualize 'foreigness'? As a permanent or mutable condition?
- How many different types of foreignness can you think of?
- In your entourage, can you think of persons that you would qualify as 'foreign'?
- Do you consider yourself as a 'foreigner'? If yes, under which conditions?

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